

IN A DEEP REALM ON THE BRINK OF DOOM,
SHE WAS THE LAST HOPE FOR SAVING THE SEA...

MERMAID'S SONG

A FANTASY NOVEL BY
ALIDA VAN GORES



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SEADRAGON'S MADNESS

Elan swam up to the Seadragon, fighting the churning currents to reach his head. The screams of the dying, the thunderous collapse of the caverns, and the roaring of the Seadragon was deafening. Just as she reached the height of his massive head, the Dragon flung back his neck and a horn caught Elan by the hair. She tried to free herself, but the thrashing of his movements tangled her ever more. Desperately Elan reached up and held onto the horn, but in the violence of the Dragon's twisting she was flung about and she felt herself breaking, heard bones snapping.

Even though she felt her life ebbing, Elan began to sing, working Merra magic to calm the Dragon's wrath. And slowly the madness faded until, at last, the Seadragon—with Elan hanging broken and dangling in the festive garlands still twisted about his head—swam away from the Caverns. . . .

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MERMAID'S SONG



Alida Van Gores



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*To my family,
C. Deborah, Pammy, and Isabelle.*

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Prologue



Elan arched her back, gave two swift kicks of her tail, and swam through a low rocky portal. She had discovered this shortcut out of the Caverns, a narrow fissure in the rocks that sank deep, then opened toward the rising sun. If her stepfather, Thon, had traveled to the east shoals in his hunting, perhaps she could catch him before it was too late.

Through the dark meandering passage, Elan swam toward the slash of glimmering light at the opening. The crevice was narrow and restricted her movements. With her arms stretched out in front of her, she could make no more than small flicks of her tail.

Elan reached the mouth of the crevice and darted into the brightness. Several strands of her copper-colored hair tangled on a cluster of barnacles, but she pulled free and swam straight up, nearly to the surface. She hovered there, peering into the distant blue of the sea, and she rotated slowly, hoping to see some sign of Thon.

"Radna bones," Elan muttered, the only oath she knew. Thon had not come this way, and that left her much behind him. He must have gone south, toward the shallows. She raced to catch him before he got to the third reef and into the open sea.

If Thon swam through the dawn chasing some distant school of fish until his lungs burst, then found that the net he had taken from the cave had a hole in it, his mood would be foul for days. Though Elan was only eleven winters, her foster mother had entrusted her with the task of finding Thon before he had gone too far. He was to come back to the living cave and take the net that had been mended.

As Elan swam she looked in all directions. Luckily, the sea was clear today, but there were few outside the Caverns this early, and none of those she saw carried nets. She hurried along the first reef that circled the Caverns. It rose just slightly from the sloping ocean floor and was composed of mounds of coral and small stones. Still swimming south, Elan quickly caught sight of the second reef. It was much like the first, with scattered flat stony areas dotted with starfish and anemones.

Elan swam well above the reef for a better view of the surrounding waters. She could just make out the third reef and tried to discern the shapes of those swimming in the distance. Near her, two Ghrismogs were coming in her direction. Elan swam away from the reef to avoid them, but a third Mog, young and sullen, came at her. Rather than invite rebuke, she dropped to his eye level and slowed. It was not a strict law in the Caverns that Merra must not swim higher than Ghrismogs, but attacks were most often made from above, so if this Mog felt himself threatened, he could pull a weapon and rage on long enough to delay her impossibly. Elan cast down her eyes before him. He grunted his approval of her obedience, then she sped off, more anxious at the delay. She looked both ways down the length of the reef and out to sea as well.

Still, there was no sign of Thon. Elan began to wonder if he may have stopped in a grog shop. It was not likely, but how could he have gotten so far? Perhaps she had chosen the wrong direction altogether. She had reached the clusters of rocks that marked the southern end of the Caverns and the direction of the shallows. The looming wall of the third reef appeared in front of her. The coral beds rose high from the seafloor and over the centuries had enveloped the boulders piled against and on top of them. At one time the wall reached to the surface of the sea and had but a few openings. It had served as a line of defense against invaders from distant oceans. But there had been no wars, and storms had raged against the barriers. Gradually the seafloor had fallen until the great reef had become stacks of broken rubble. It rose perhaps halfway to the surface and provided a haven for rockfish and crabs.

Elan swam nearer the reef. She could see specks in the distance, swimming away into the endless blue. Her heart

pounded as she wondered what she should do. Like most children of the Caverns, she was forbidden to venture past the third reef. Only hunters and netters went that far. Few others had occasion to travel into the open sea. Danger lurked there, and there was little refuge from predators.

Elan flattened her arms at her sides and pumped her tail fiercely. She was going beyond. She was more afraid of Thon's wrath than of whatever menace awaited her, and Thon would be angry if she found him—and angrier if she did not.

The moment she crossed over, Elan knew her first thrill of danger, of doing something forbidden. The tastes and smells upon the water of the open sea were ripe with threat, but beyond these warnings was the unknown, a mysterious beckoning, irresistible with its promise of freedom.

Elan followed someone she thought might be Thon, but as she drew nearer, she knew it was not him. She stopped a moment to look around. The sun had risen higher in the sky and the sea turned milky green. She saw a group of three netters swimming to the west, but none of them swam as Thon did. Her hope of finding him dwindled. It had carried her forward in a rush, and without it, she drifted, both in her purpose and upon the current. She did not like the thought of giving up, but wherever Thon was, he was far from this destitute place.

Elan fanned her tail slowly and rotated in a circle, holding her floating hair away from her eyes. Now she would have to find her way back. The movement of her quest had been a shield. The moment she knew she had failed, Elan felt suddenly vulnerable to the threat that surrounded her. She wanted to be safely back in the living cave with Maadu. The thought of disappointing her foster mother made Elan unhappy. Maadu would not be angry with her. She rarely was. It was Elan who had thought she could catch Thon before he had gotten too far. Anything to keep him from raging at Maadu and the rest of them for his own mistake.

Elan turned back. She could see the dark rise of the third reef and she swam toward it, feeling downcast. She had traveled just a short distance when she started with fear. She looked above her, for she was certain a shadow had passed over her, the chill of an ominous presence. There was nothing above her, but as she looked back

toward the open sea, something moved far away. She stopped and stared, then shuddered as a strong warning of danger set her instincts on edge. She knew the figure was not Thon, for it was pale, nearly motionless, and upright in the water. There were large fish swimming at strange angles around him. They looked like sharks. Elan ignored her instinct to flee. Was he in trouble? Should she get help?

Though she knew she should not, she dropped down toward a ridge thick with mosses and growth, and swam along it, her belly pressed close to the black rock. The ridge would give her a hiding place as she ventured closer.

She picked her way carefully, holding on to the rocks to stay low. She drew closer, and saw that, indeed, they were sharks. They created such a wall of circling motion that she could not see who was at their center. She moved closer still. At a single moment, the sharks opened their circle, and the stranger revealed himself. A scream welled up inside Elan. She swallowed it, but it filled her head and threatened to burst out her ears. Her small hands gripped the rock beneath her as she tried to make herself invisible. She was terrified; it had been a mistake to come this close. She did not know who he was, but she knew he was a hunter. Even Thon grew grim as he talked of them—hunters who did not search for food, but who were paid to deliver death.

What most distressed Elan was that he was Merra, like her, not Ghrismog, as were all the other hunters she had heard about. She felt shame, for though she knew the Merra were outcasts among the Ghrismogs, she had never thought them capable of malevolence.

The Merra hunter was ghastly. His hair and skin were of the same blue-white cast as the underbelly of his sharks. His hair was shorn close and stood out from his head. The worst were his eyes. They were as black as onyx glass, and these too were like his sharks', in the lifelessness of their gaze. At his command were blues, sharks that could rip flesh away effortlessly. Elan wanted nothing more than to flee, but she was afraid he would see her if she moved. Her breath was coming so fast, she could see small plumes of sand dancing beneath her mouth, her face pressed close to the ridge.

Elan counted them. There were thirteen blues, larger

than any she had ever seen. The hunter hovered above them and seemed to be training them, yet there wasn't a sound. They circled a fish, one as large as Elan, that the Ghrismogs called gambies. It had a large sloping head, black and orange bands, and an odd, jutting jaw. Elan saw its terrified eyes rolling back in its head as first one shark, then the next swam at it silently from the circling ring, only to veer away at the last moment, jagged teeth empty of prey.

Elan's stomach churned as the gamby excreted its last meal and darted into the cloud, hoping vainly to hide itself. The hunter watched his blues, raising a spiked weapon if one fell out of the circle. He was taking pleasure in prolonging the gamby's suffering. The speed of the circling beasts became frenzied, and the passes of the breakaway sharks grew more frequent. Still, the hunter somehow silently kept them from the kill, their deference to his will overcoming their desire to feed. Elan was transfixed between fascination and fear. Even the gamby seemed perversely curious about this mortal ballet. Then suddenly one, then the next, then the next shark tore a mouthful of flesh from the fish. Each strike butted the gamby—what remained of it—in one direction, then another, yet the sharks did not lose their deadly rhythm. Elan was so hypnotized by this morbid vision that she did not notice the hunter was no longer among his blues.

A frenzied premonition of her own death jolted Elan. She looked up to see the hunter directly above her. A strange half smile pulled his lips back from his teeth, which were perfect and white. His broad chest was muscled, his arms were powerful, and his deep blue tail sliced the water. Elan shot away, but he was faster, knocking her into the rocks and trapping her with his body and arms. He placed one hand around her throat. His thumb and fingers nearly met; his touch held threat, but no pain. Elan would have screamed, but she was certain he would crush her throat, the silence being more important to him than her life. He pulled her up until she was facing him, and studied her. Up close his eyes were hideous. His half smile did not change as he hooked his weapon into a belt with his free hand. He did not utter a sound.

Elan saw the excited movement of his sharks as they left the blood cloud to circle her. She tried to control her

trembling. His stare was as cutting as a blade's. She could not bear the silence, nor not knowing what he would do to her. There was only the deadly whoosh of the sharks' tails cutting through the water around her. Elan watched their trails of bubbles colliding, then spiraling to the surface.

She wanted to speak, to demand that he let her go, but she was paralyzed beneath his gaze. Her heart pounded until her entire body pulsated with it. He took his free hand and laid it over her chest. She had no breasts yet, unlike her mother and older sister. Did he find pleasure in feeling her terror?

As the circling of his sharks grew more frantic, his movements became so slow they were trancelike. With half-closed eyes, he stared down at her, his chest rising and falling with his quickening breath. He studied his own fingers as they splayed out over her breast, then moved to her waist. His other hand stayed firmly around her throat. He began trembling with a private and dark pleasure, yet it was his silence that sickened her most.

Elan's fear turned to anger. He was torturing her, as he had the fish. But she knew if she moved she would break this spell, and he would surely kill her. He studied her face. Elan could read several expressions in him. He wanted something in her, something for which he searched. He admired her courage. But more than anything else, he hated her, though the seed of his hatred had been planted long before her birth.

Elan felt herself being pulled toward him. Now he will kill me, she thought, and brought her arms up to push against him. For a moment she thought he would try to kiss her, and she turned her face away. She waited for the pain, but there was only stillness, his violent silence, close enough that she could feel his breath brush past her cheek. What was he doing? She had just turned to look at him when a crushing pain ripped through her shoulder as his teeth sank in and broke her skin. Elan clenched her jaw, afraid to utter a sound.

When he pulled away to face her again, he smiled. She saw her blood on his mouth before it drifted away. Without thinking, she drew back to strike him but flinched as his face contorted. His piercing gaze drove back a shark that brushed by her arm, drawn by the smell of blood. There was all the movement in his face and eyes

of his command, yet nothing more than this otherworldly silence. Elan clearly heard his thought, however. It had burst inside her head. He had commanded the shark, "We will wait." Nothing more than that. "We will wait."

He let go of her neck and drifted back, still staring. His sharks clustered around him, and as one, they turned. As he swam away, Elan felt the stinging in her shoulder. She pulled her hair back and saw the wound that circled her entire shoulder. His teeth had sunk deep and there would be a scar. A round scar.

Elan looked out at him again, now nearly invisible in the distance, and she knew he had done it to mark her—to fulfill his own prophecy. He had said he would wait. For with this mark, he knew how to find her.

1

A Bitter Lesson



MANY WINTERS LATER

A towering forest of kelp swayed on the current. Living anchors clung to the rocks on the seafloor as the plants grew toward the sun, their amber branches floating on the surface in great tangled webs. It was a grove so vast, Elan could not see the end of it. She would be working until the new moon or longer. The plants, ripe for harvesting, grew thick, and what little sunlight penetrated, broke into shafts that darted about the gloom. Elan heard the gruff voices of the Mogmaids a few rows away. They did not like her and refused to work near her.

Thon had a friend who owned the land upon which these sea vegetables grew. Harvesting was difficult work, and if a Mog had no family, he was forced to hire help at harvesting time. Thon had made Elan work in the grove for four winters. She had learned to measure time as the Ghrismogs had taught her, by the counting of winters past. Beneath the sea, all seasons were indistinguishable from one another but for winter, which brought storms and violent currents.

Harvesting the groves of sea vegetables was considered the work of outcasts. No decent citizen of the Caverns would subject himself to the rigors or to the monotony. Small pearls were given in trade for these labors, and those that Elan earned were kept by Thon. What she got were barnacle slashes the lengths of her arms, and deep puncture wounds in her hands from the speeca, slugs with spines that made their homes in the hollows between branch and body of the large plants.

Elan tied the woven sack she had filled to an outcropping of rock, and this time she fastened the knots well.

She had worked in the grove for three days since the harvesting began, and what she only suspected the first day, she learned was true the second.

The Mogmaids she worked with rarely spoke with her, but several times they had come to tell her to mend webbing for them, and each time she returned to her own harvesting sacks, there were fewer of them. Elan knew knots from her weaving that no one could untie, and if the Mogmaids would steal her work, then they would have to cut the fastenings. Elan tied another empty sack to the belt at her waist and swam toward the surface.

She held the blade the landowner gave to her each day as she arrived. She was not allowed to keep it, for Merra were not permitted to carry weapons. The landowners' blades were dull, and though she knew how to sharpen the knife to make her work easier, she knew all she would gain for her labors would be to have one of the Mogmaids take it from her. Elan was Merra, and a Merra was not a Ghrismog. Reason enough.

Elan felt the warmth of the sun in the water near the surface and reached for a handful of long leaves, drawing the blade across the stems. The slick film that covered the leaves made them difficult to grasp, but she was used to it, and she stuffed the cuttings into the small mouth of the sack and reached for another handful. A school of delicate bluefish surrounded her, and Elan's spirits lifted. The grove she worked in grew outside the second reef, and if there was one good thing about these labors, it was that they took her away from the dark of the living caves. Little sea life passed near the Caverns. Sometimes a shark, too old to hunt swifter prey, would stray into the center place. And sometimes, but too rarely, the great whales might pass, gray whales and blue, barnaclebacks and graceful killers. A nearby pod was an event that would be talked over in grog shops for moons.

Elan cut more fistfuls of leaves and slowly filled her sack. She worked her way from the tip of the branch toward the body of the plant and reminded herself to watch for speeca spines. They left a paralyzing poison in the puncture wounds that made her arms ache up to her shoulders. As she continued cutting, she noticed that the bluefish had been joined by a small silver fish with black stripes running between tail and gill. Without thinking, Elan began a song to them as she worked.

Some want gold, and some want cakes,
Some say pearls can cure heartaches,
Keep those treasures for yourself,
For me, a friend, is what I'll take.
Pearls are mute, and rubies cold,
Lands are bought, and lands are sold,
As I lie in my death web,
Just give me one friend's hand to hold.

Elan felt a sudden rush of fear and looked to the next row of plants. A Mogmaid swam out from her hiding place, her eyes narrowed.

"Were you singing?" The maid's voice rose in triumph. "It is forbidden for Merra to sing, and I heard you." Her wide mouth nearly turned up at the corners, she was so pleased with her discovery. She was broad and heavy-breasted, and she swam menacingly toward Elan. "I have heard Elders pull out the tongues of Merra who sing when they're not supposed to." Elan felt guilt pierce her fear. How many times had Maadu asked her and Thon threatened her? If this maid made a fuss, Elan's family would be shamed because of her. Then Thon would watch her even more closely. She had something important to do, and Thon sensed it. That was why he kept finding extra work for her.

"I'm sorry," Elan whispered.

"You're sorry? What is that to me? You are a danger and a menace." The maid's mouth hung open, the next tirade waiting to spill out, when Elan saw that she remembered something. The Mogmaid smiled, her lower lids rising as if to conceal her secret. "Never mind, I have something for you to do," the Mogmaid lied.

"As you wish." Elan kept her eyes downcast. Of course they meant to take her full sacks to count among their own. It would be a small trade if this maid would keep silent about Elan's transgression. Elan wished she had not tied her knots so well. Whichever maid was sent to do the stealing would be a long time at the task.

Elan followed the maid at a respectful distance. They swam past several rows and Elan glanced up as she heard the other maid's voices. There were four of them, the fifth already at Elan's sacks. They were all thoroughly Mogmaid with little blending, the cross between Merra and Ghrismog. Their tail colors were moss green

to brown, and their hair much the same. If a maid had much Merra in her, she might be called a Merramog and her colors might be more varied, her face different, but these were Mogmaids, and one even had the split tail. Instead of a single tail, this maid had two, long and thin. They were much like the split tails from above in the dry world, but still covered with scales, with the tips sprouting tails. Only some Mogs had this characteristic. Some liked it, some not at all.

Elan had not seen this split-tailed maid in the grove before. It was obvious that she had not come here to work. In fact, Elan was sure this maid had done little work in her life. Her long dark hair was woven through with strands of pearls, worn only by the wealthier of the Mog families, and the skin of her hands and arms was free of the scrapes and scars of those who labored. Elan wondered what she was doing here, and noticed that the other maids looked to her as their leader.

"We have a sack that needs mending, Merra," the split-tailed Mogmaid said. Though she did not work among them, she would take part in their thieving game. Elan saw the amused expression on her face and was curious about the differences between the two of them. This maid's gillwings made her face more wide than long, though Elan knew she would be considered beautiful by Ghrismog standards.

Elan took the webbing the maid handed her and saw that the bag had been sliced. She immediately began to work, cutting loose pieces of sea grass from a nearby thatch and twisting them. Though weaving was thought to be a lowly craft because it was mainly Merra who practiced the art, Elan saw from the corner of her eye that the maids watched what she did closely. She tied nearly invisible knots to each of the severed threads. Her fingers were sore from the cuts and punctures, but the Mogmaids would not know it. She wove the grasses into a pattern that resembled the patterns used in the work sacks, then quickly began to close the hole and complete her task. The Mogmaids looked over her shoulder nervously for the return of their friend, then fidgeted. Elan laid the sack down with a small stone on top to keep it from drifting, and looked at them expectantly. She knew they could not yet allow her to leave, but they had no more false work for her to do.

"Uh," one began, "if you Merra made these sacks better in the first place, then they wouldn't need so much mending." Elan said nothing. "Isn't that right?" the fumbling maid asked the split tail.

"How strange these Merra look up close. She looks little like us. Is that a bud shell, or a mouth, and what color is that for hair?" By the harshness of her voice, Elan knew this maid who led them cared little whether they had excuse or not for keeping her. Their laughter was cut short by a horrible scream. All of them stared at each other, then swam quickly for the source of the screams.

Elan knew they came from where she had been working. She was a fast swimmer and reached there long before the others. In the gloomy water at the base of the plants was the fifth Mogmaid. She was younger than the rest, and she held her arm, struggling and crying piteously. As Elan drew closer, she saw the eel, its long muscled body wriggling, its teeth sunk deeply into the maid's arm. Her eyes looked to Elan, pleading for an end to the pain. The other maids swam nearer, and seeing the eel, several of them screamed and drifted back.

The eel was large, and its weight dragged the maid to the sandy seafloor. Its teeth were sharp and angled in its mouth, its grip impossible to break. Elan swam down to the maid's side. She didn't know what to do to help, but the young maid's eyes were on her, frightened.

"Stay as still as you can. He bites harder if he feels you struggle." Elan did not know if it was true but felt something good would come if she wove calmness into her voice. The maid understood, and Elan thought she quieted bravely, more bravely than she might have. They all waited for Elan to do something. She was used to being ignored, used to their derision, but not to their looking to her for help. It frightened her.

The split-tailed maid swam closer to watch, and it seemed to Elan that she smiled. Merras were considered inferior beings who harbored illusions of their powers to heal. There was a challenge in the glance of the Mogmaid. Elan had no illusions of special powers—she knew she had none—and wanted only to swim away to her work. But the eel wriggled viciously and the young maid did not cry out. She looked at Elan, her face full of pain and

trust. Elan suddenly forgot the split-tailed maid, knowing she must try something.

The eel lay on the bottom, wishing only to be back in its hole; the trapped maid drifted motionlessly near it. Moving slowly, Elan scooped handfuls of sand over the eel's head. The eel tried to get away and the maid and Elan moved with it, Elan pouring more and more sand about its head. She was only guessing, but it seemed when the sand filled the eel's mouth and gills, the creature would care more to breathe than bite, and its razor teeth would loosen their grip. She did not know how the knowledge came to her—certainly not from the Ghrismogs. She only hoped it would work.

"It crushes less," the maid said quietly, and at that, the split-tailed maid rushed toward them. Her sudden movement frightened the eel, and the young maid screamed as the eel sank its teeth back into her again.

"Stay back, stupid maid," Elan blurted.

"How dare you," growled the Mogmaid, and picked up a stone with which to strike Elan.

"Kili, please! Please!" the young maid pleaded. The older maid drifted back. Elan could still feel the Mogmaid's anger while she looked at the young one growing dangerously pale. The eel, frightened now, was nothing but teeth and ferocity. Elan pulled her hair back and drifted toward the eel. With her face very near the fearsome eel's, she spoke slowly.

"Neska ulatay dunta." Words she had never learned, words that came to her from another memory. Though she was startled at their strangeness, she said them again, evenly, and without threat. "Neska ulatay dunta." The eel opened its jaws wide, and suddenly the maid's bloody arm was free. The eel swam away in a waving, rhythmic motion. Kili, the split-tailed maid, had her blade back, ready to slice the eel as it passed her.

"Don't do it!" Elan shouted a warning. She did not know what the words she had spoken to the eel meant, but she sensed in them some bargain for mutual safety. Elan saw rage turn Kili's face livid. The eel passed her to safety, so the split-tailed maid swam at Elan instead. Elan did not dare defend herself as the furious Kili grabbed her hair and pulled her head back. She had her blade ready to cut away her hair when another of the maids, perhaps the sister of the injured maid, interjected.

"Kili, no, she helped us."

"She did not help me," Kili hissed.

"No, she helped Lanat."

"I heard her singing," the heavy-breasted maid added, also angry. They did not like being helped by a Merra.

"Singing!" Kili was both shocked and pleased. "She was singing, and I think she used Merra words to make the eel go."

"I heard her," her friend agreed. The injured Lanat and her sister were quiet. Elan felt the knife blade near her forehead and waited for her hair to be shorn. It had all been cut off once before by Thon. She had talked back to him, and since then, she had a fear of his, or any other's rage turned against her. She would be horribly punished if she were to fight back. Suddenly Kili pushed her away.

"I have a better idea," Kili said, her thick eyelids nearly covering her green eyes. "We will take her to the Elders. She sang, she used Merra words from the old time, and she spoke with great disrespect to me. That is enough to earn her the punishment she deserves." Elan's stomach churned. Kili glanced at the others. The punishment could be grim, but the shame to Elan and her family would be greater. At least a few of the maids had enough fairness to know this was poor gratitude for the help Elan had given them. Kili sensed their hesitation, her two long tails crossing and uncrossing to keep her upright, facing them.

"How do we know she didn't tie her work sack near the eel's hole on purpose? She knew we would play this trick on her and she played a cruel one on us instead, on poor Lanat." Kili looked at the maids' faces and her own bearing became smug as she saw them considering this possibility. "You know the Merras' ways with beasts, you saw her talk to the eel. Perhaps she was thanking it for protecting the sack as she had asked."

"To the Center Place with her, and I hope the Elders find some wretched dark hole to put her in for a long time." It was Lanat's sister who believed Kili, and Elan could see that the others would go along with her. Lanat knew it was not true. She looked at Elan and was sorry. Elan felt as if she were in a bad dream.

One maid held Elan's arms and another tied her hands. It was an unnecessary precaution, but it made her humili-

ation more complete. They swam around her like guards all the way to the Center Place. Elan remembered little of the journey, she was so deep in her worries. She did notice that Lanat bent over her arm, and was helped swimming. She would go to a healer, also in the Center Place.

Many stared at Elan with her hands tied, and the shame grew hot in her cheeks. If she were locked up for this, not only would Thon have a rage that would last for moons, but it would ruin any chance she might have to get away. And she had to get out of the Caverns.

In the distant blue waters the dark rolling forms of the Caverns appeared, encircled by the fragments of coral reef and wall. For countless centuries, the series of underground interconnected chambers had provided shelter. Rocky mounds rose slightly from the seafloor in a ring that stretched as far as the eye could see. Beneath them the rock and living caves sank deep. The Center Place, as its name promised, was at the heart of the Caverns on the inside periphery of the catacombed chambers. In the center of the ring was a vast stretch of sand that sank deeper than the sloping walls of the Caverns. Around this arena of sand were clustered food vendors, grog shops, weapons makers, and weavers. Most importantly there stood the Grand Chamber where the Elders and the other lawmakers converged. Elan was dimly aware that they neared their destination.

"What is your name?" Elan did not hear Lanat's question, she had asked it so quietly. "What is your name?" Lanat asked again. Elan was as startled as the others. No Ghrismog, maid or male, had ever asked her name. Her family rarely called her by it.

"Elan, my name is Elan." Lanat nodded as her sister guided her away. Lanat's interest angered Kili.

"Good that we know it," Kili nearly yelled. She wanted all who swam by to know. "Now when we tell of the cruelty of the Merra against the Ghrismog, we will have a name for the tale," she said, though she still would not say Elan's name.

They entered the dark chambers of the lawmakers. The water inside was colder and had a lifeless taste. Elan was too ashamed to look about. Someone approached them, and the Mogmaids told their complaint to one who served the Elders. Kili took this male aside, and Elan

could hear fragments of the story of her crimes. Kili became more angry about something. As her voice rose, Elan could hear her clearly.

"Do not try to tell me what the Elders will sit for and what they will not. You know who I am, you know the Elder Groff is my uncle."

"As you have said, but it changes nothing. The Elders are in conference and will see no one. Crimes such as these are heard by the Dispensers."

"Surely for deeds as vicious as hers an Elder must sit—I will speak with Groff. Go to him immediately," Kili yelled. "Tell him I am here—I saw him only this day, it was his errand I was upon in the grove when this Merra attacked me."

"Grave though your injuries appear," the server said evenly, and Kili glared at him for the sarcasm that was heavy in his voice, "the Elders may not be disturbed."

"I am sure you are mistaken."

"The Elders do not hear this crime!"

"Then get me a Dispenser," Kili yelled back.

"There may be none available."

"What? After all of this? You are a fool, a jellyfish. Groff will hear of this." Kili looked around and dropped her voice. She spoke intently to the server, her fist clenched. The server nodded, saying little, and at last went his own way. Elan could tell by the quick slices of his brown tail that he was still angry. The server slowed as he passed the guards who watched the entrance of the Elders' chambers.

"Make certain no one passes," he warned the guards, his eyes narrowed at Kili. The fierce maid glared at him until he disappeared, then turned her gaze upon Elan. Elan looked only at the sand beneath her but could feel Kili's anger. A short time later she heard the return of the server as he called for them to follow.

They swam from the large domed entry chamber and moved along a passageway. There were fissures in the caves that opened to the sea and light above. There was enough illumination to see that the smooth rocks of the passages were barren of life, but for a thin coat of yellow-green algae. They passed the yawning doors to several other chambers. The server turned into the last doorway, and they entered a room no more than five tails across.

The Dispenser drifted near a worktable strewn with

tablets and shell fragments. A hole in the roof let in light from above, and along the wall were woven storage nets filled with other tablets. The server half bowed to the Dispenser, then kicked his tail harder than he needed to as he left. A cloud of sand from the floor of the chamber stung Kili, but she had no time to bother with the server now. She was intent upon only one purpose—Elan's punishment.

"Sabat," Kili addressed the Dispenser by the word used to denote respect for anyone who was more powerful. "You do not know me, but you know my uncle, the Elder Groff." She hesitated for the Dispenser to speak, but he only nodded. "Sabat, this Merra has engaged in crimes against us and has caused great physical harm to one of our friends who lies half-dead with the healers as we speak."

"It's true," wailed the heavy-breasted maid, caught by the same urgency for revenge. "She sang, and talked in Merra tongue, and made a vicious eel attack our friend. Lanat's arm is nearly off."

"Sabat, we are all witnesses. She sang, which is forbidden for Merra, and she made some magic spell to force an eel to do her bidding, and she was in a rage at me when I . . . when I tried to help my friend. We have come to you for justice." The Dispenser studied all of them, including Elan, who only glanced at him, then lowered her head to stare at the floor of his chamber. The short silence was too much for Kili, who began again. Her friends spoke at the same time until there was a constant harangue. Elan looked up at the sudden silence and saw that the Dispenser had taken a stern look and held up one hand to quiet them. Elan studied his face. It was a Mog face, his nose flat, nearly flush with his cheeks. He had a beard and a broad downturned mouth. His mouth opened and closed, and Elan knew he must make good use of tongue telling. Tongue telling was a way some Ghrismogs and Merra had of sensing emotions on the current. Opening the mouth allowed water to lie across the tongue. In tastes emitted by other living beings, and in invisible tremors felt only upon the tongue, were impressions, and the water's special truths. Many were able to make use of this extra sense.

"There will be justice," the Dispenser said, his voice so deep it rumbled inside Elan's chest. Elan did not know why, but she liked this Ghrismog. "You will leave." He

posed it as an unchallengeable command. Kili would challenge him all the same.

"But we must tell you the details."

"I have heard all I need. There will be justice. The Merra will be punished in accordance with her crimes, which are serious."

This mollified Kili somewhat. "I would like to know the punishment."

"You will have no need. Know that she will suffer." Elan quietly opened her mouth and tasted something odd upon the current. Though his words were frightening, so much so that one of the maids grew pale, Elan could find no threat upon her tongue.

"We are satisfied, Sabat." Kili threw one last look of triumph at Elan, and the maids swam from the chamber. Elan felt herself relax when the last sounds of their voices faded from the passageways outside, and she looked at the Dispenser. He was studying her, wide eyes heavily lidded from top and bottom as were all Ghrismogs'.

"You have been tongue telling, too, haven't you, maid? Or I would be sensing more fear in you."

"Is it forbidden?" Elan asked.

"For Merra? Not yet, but one never knows." Elan did not answer, waiting for the Dispenser to speak. She sensed kindness in him and would have told him her side of the story, but it had never done her any good in the past.

"When those maids talked, upon my tongue came nothing but lies. I have no doubt that some of it was true, but I will not speculate on the specifics of your crimes, but on the one crime. Your crime is that you are Merra." Elan looked away. There was kindness in his tone, and it touched the shame in her more deeply. A shame she had been taught to feel since her childhood, doubts about the race from which she had come. Elan knew he would tell her of the travesty. It was a time during which the disgrace of the Merra began. The story of it was called "the travesty," and Elan had heard pieces of it, like threads in a tapestry, though the events were not clear to her. All she knew for certain was that the shame that wove itself through time to her was as heavy as chains. No Merra was free of the burden.

The Dispenser loosened his drift belt, a woven plait of soft sea grasses secured to a wall or a chamber floor. It

was to keep those who needed to do table work near their tools. There were marks one could make in shell tablets for records and remembering, and drifting was a nuisance. The Dispenser offered another belt to Elan. She knew that meant he would keep her for some time, but she declined his offer. She wasn't used to drift belts, and her hair often tangled in the clasp.

"You know the Merras' crime?" the Dispenser asked her.

"Only partly," Elan answered. Maadu had tried to tell her of it, but she was too kind to speak cruelly of what little Elan knew of her past.

"Perhaps I should tell you. We will call it part of your punishment, though being Merra in this age is punishment enough. But better I tell you than someone else for you will find few who think as I do. You see, the Merras' only real crime was their inability to gauge the evil in others. The Merra, the many of them long ago, and the few of them now, know beauty. That is the one passion that burns in them. They do not want to own, they have no need to conquer. All that has meaning for them is to create a refuge from a world that is dark. The Merra could create it, but they were unable to defend it." He leveled his gray eyes upon her. "They forgot that predation is the way."

"That is when the Olaki came?" Elan asked.

The Dispenser came back to her from a dream he had allowed himself. "Yes, the Olaki. Your friend here, the one with the split tail? She is a remnant of their conquering the Caverns." The Dispenser noticed Elan's startled look. "You thought she was another form of Ghrismog? She is, but there were none before we were broken." The Dispenser studied her and set his jaw. "I will give you a history lesson, maid. It is something you should know; it may help you to understand the hatred." The Dispenser pulled slowly at his beard and stared at the unadorned rocks of his ceiling.

"It was an age long ago. The Merra ruled and the Caverns were safe and lush with gardens. Food was plentiful, shelters were deep and strong against winter storms. Little was wanted.

"There were many more Merra than Ghrismogs then. Some said the Merra were happier, and had not the shame attached to the dance, so there were more young.

The Merra were just, and with the exception of their one profound weakness, their world could not have been improved upon. In that age there were more like us, more who were half of the dry world and half of the wet. In days of old there were many explorers from distant seas, some black, others all of scale."

"I saw a traveler once." Elan could not help herself. "He was covered with hair, like an otter in face and body."

"You were lucky to have seen one. Once the Center Place must have been exciting, rich with traders and outsiders. All of them brought their languages and ways from their own dry legacies. But for now, it is only the Olaki we need to talk about.

"The Olaki lived far away in another sea. They had searched for winters and had found no shelter. Having no builders among them, their living caves suffered great damage each winter. When the most severe storms left them in ruin, they made a grave decision. They had sent envoys in the past to the Caverns, and the relations between the Merra and the Olaki were friendly. These envoys had returned each time to their own ruined centers and had started rumors among their populace of the living caves of the Merra, covered with pearls, and of the abundance of food."

"They could not grow food or hunt?" Elan interrupted.

"The cold currents enveloped them, and it was easier to take from the Merra than to find caverns of their own. The Olaki began preparing. They spent long moons making weapons. The Olaki knew the Merra were peaceful and that the Ghrismogs were more wily. But at the time, the Ghrismogs had no power in the governing of the Caverns. The Ghrismogs suspected threat and sent traders to the Caverns of the Olaki to find what they could of Olaki plans. Moons before the invasion, the Ghrismogs tried to warn the High Elder, and those in power, that war lay ahead. No one listened. The Merra, because they had little capacity for greed, could not conceive of it in others. They did not know simple greed, and certainly not consuming and desperate greed. The Ghrismogs wanted to arm themselves."

"What were the Merra doing? Why did they not prepare?"

"The Merra had all the craftsmen, all of them, working

at the Grand Chamber. Something to be proud of, no denying, but little to do with the weapons they should have been preparing.

"When the Olaki came, they came with no mercy in their hearts. You have heard, no doubt you have seen for yourself the cruelty of the Ghrismogs? It is trifling to the Olakis. They murdered many Ghrismogs and many more Merra. Strangely enough, it was the beauty and the comfort they coveted, yet they destroyed as much as they could. Caverns were obliterated. Grove after grove of sea vegetable was torn from its anchors and drifted to other seas to rot. The Merra were so decimated, in their numbers and in their spirits, that nothing they knew of tending the groves would they impart to the Olaki. There was little the Ghrismogs could tell them, for Mogs had no interest in the cultivation of food. What Merras were left, faded. The Olaki killed no Elders, but confined them deep in the Caverns. The Mogs adapted more easily to the Olaki because they had at least their ambition in common, but the Ghrismogs do not wear harnesses well. They had come to love the beautiful world the Merra had created, yet from that time, anything beautiful spoke of treachery.

"Some Merras stayed, many disappeared, gone to other seas, unable to live in the Caverns as they had become. So it was left to the Ghrismogs to take back what once had been theirs. No one could have guessed the invaders were not yet finished with their plan to make the Caverns wholly their own. The Olaki needed Mogs for laborers, so instead of killing them, they took the males old enough to impregnate maids and cut them. For an entire generation, all the young born to Mogmaids were half-Olaki. The Mogs were not then, and some say now, as intelligent as the Merra, but unlike the Merra, they knew obliteration, and it made them fierce. Some say too that no Mog can keep a secret if it can be bought. But there was one terrible secret, and no one, not even the mothers of those half-Olaki young, would let it pass their lips. Blades were made from the bones of fish, as many as there were hands to hold them. The children, maids, old and young, each marked one Olaki throat, or two or three. And in one horrendous night, more than half the numbers of Olaki who had come to slaughter the Merra had been slaughtered themselves in their sleep. Some say

it was the taste of Olaki blood on the current that woke the survivors. When they beheld how many of their own had been slain, they fled. As the story tells it, the walls of the Caverns were stained red for many winters, and the souls of the Ghrismogs much longer. Few Merra returned, and those who did found a dark change."

"A terrible story." Elan's eyes were wide with the imagined horror.

"In many ways," the Dispenser agreed. "In the Ghrismogs was planted the seed of what would later be the Merras' demise. Beauty was synonymous with Merra, and the Merra had allowed the decimation. The Merra leaders were freed, even the High Elder. She continued, as she had before the travesty, to rule. But she found no friend as her power was slowly taken from her. The Ghrismogs would not forget, and now there were more of them than there were of the Merra. Under her, much was done to heal the ravages. But the Ghrismogs' greed had been born. Before they would allow disaster to repeat itself, they would take the Caverns for themselves. A Ghrismog became High Elder. Soon it was the Ghrismog policy to erase all that had to do with the Merra, and they did so with a vengeance."

Elan had never been allowed to ask of Merra lore. Perhaps she was not incorrect about his kindness.

"What of the Seadragons all this time?" she asked. She dreamed of the Seadragons, and the most bitter of her sorrows was that no Merra were allowed to tend them. Only Mogmaids were Betweens, keepers of the dragons.

"Ah, yes, the Seadragons," the Dispenser said wistfully. "Because the Seadragons were important to the Merra, the Ghrismogs' reverence, their belief, began to fade. It did not disappear, for they knew that Seadragons held the secret to the Balance, but the Ghrismogs raised up their own sacred symbols, the Bleeding One—you know him, no doubt?"

Elan knew that many Ghrismogs went by the word of a male gone many centuries. One who bled but did not die. He had much to say against the Merra and he claimed to be the embodiment of the Seadragons' power. He went away long ago, but his words were spread by others. Elan turned back to the Dispenser, whose voice rumbled on. She could not believe a Mog was speaking to her of such things.

"Mogmaids continued to tend the Seadragons, and there were still Choosings, but the Ghrismogs did all in their power to diminish the reverence for the wondrous beasts. They were most successful with their plan, and much has changed because of it." Elan could not read in his face what his feelings were toward the Seadragons. The Dispenser was distracted by the entrance of his attendant.

"Sabat, the hunters' dispute is still to be heard. They await you." The attendant's glance fell upon Elan, and she knew he thought little of his Sabat wasting this much time upon a Merra.

"Soon, soon." The Dispenser nodded to his attendant, who swam away. The mood in his chamber had changed, and Elan had countless questions about the Choosing and the Seadragons, but she knew the moment had passed. She felt him studying her, saw his eyes fall over the scrapes on her arms and her swollen fingers.

"So, we must be on with your punishment," he said.

"Yes, Sabat." Elan waited, looking into his face. She was grateful for what he had told her, though the truth of her Merra past felt more like a shadow hanging over her. She waited for his judgment. No matter what he found, it was lost. Thon would be so angry with her, she would never be allowed to leave the cave.

"You were raised by Mogs?" he asked.

"Yes," Elan said, and wondered how he knew.

"You are afraid of the open sea?"

"No, Sabat," Elan answered.

"Say, yes."

"Yes," she said, puzzled. Most were frightened by the open sea.

"Then I sentence you to aloneswim. At least one full day. When you are faced with the perils of the deep waters, you will all the more appreciate the sacrifices your family has made for you. You must make your aloneswim after your harvesting duties are completed." Elan could not believe what she was hearing. It was a gift he was giving her, and she felt humbled by his kindness. "This is not to be taken lightly," he warned. "Aloneswim is for introspection, for thinking over all I have told you."

"I will, Sabat." Elan bowed her head. Any other Dispenser would have closed her in a dark small crevice for days. The old Mog nodded for her to leave.

"I will send notice to your living cave of my decision. You must tell my attendant where you live." Elan saw the attendant waiting near the entrance, the quick strokes of his tail a clear indication of his impatience. She smiled, and hurriedly swam from the chamber. It would not do to thank the Dispenser, but by his smile, Elan could tell he had been tongue telling and knew her joy.

She still had Thon's rage to face, and it would be bad for her for some time, but soon she would be in the open sea.

As she slowly made her way from the passages to her living cave, Elan thought about the Dispenser, and about the Merras' travesty. If he had been cruel, Elan could have dismissed him as she could do sometimes when she felt the Merra blood in her was not something of which to be ashamed. But now it burned in her.

Her race had allowed the darkness of this age to fall. The Merras' single-minded pursuit of grace had ironically become the poisoning of it. Elan knew she could not change what she was. Part of her was proud that the magic of her past found its way through time to her, in strange words and abilities—words that could make an eel lose its dreadful purpose. But another part of her feared the legacy her Merra blood promised.

Elan passed from the closed passages into an open ravine, and she looked up toward the sea surface. As the last warm gleaming of the sun shattered the silver water, she returned to the words of the Dispenser. There was a solitary nagging doubt that came from all his words to her. It clung to her like the growing shadows. She could not understand what it was that could make a race so blinded by the quest for splendor that survival could become an afterthought. The Merra were gone.

Elan shuddered in the sudden gloom of night and pulled her hair about her. She had no more time to ponder her life and mysteries. There was the night work in the living cave to attend to, the mending and the meal to make ready for the family. Thon would first ask for the pearls from her day's labor, and she had none to give him.

Elan turned and swam toward home. It would be a long night.

2

Cross-speaking; a Mystery Revealed



Undulating patterns of light played across the white sand, and Elan saw her shadow, long and slender beneath her.

The day before had seen the end of her harvesting duties, and at last she was allowed to make her aloneswim. She had worked hard, filling two times as many sacks of sea vegetables as the other maids combined. Near the end, Lanat had returned. She had not lost her arm, and Elan was glad of that. Lanat did not try to speak with Elan, but once Elan had heard her arguing with one of the other maids who wanted to take more of Elan's sacks.

Though Elan had been paid no more in pearls, she was proud that it was not yet the new moon, and she was away on her quest.

Thon was angry about her leaving. "There is something in this journey I do not trust," he repeated. Elan had had to be careful the last many nights to conceal her excitement. She was worried that as timely as the Dispenser's gift had been, she might yet be too late.

Elan's fostermother was again with child and Elan feared for her. Maadu weakened as her belly swelled, and what she needed was effron, a plant that grew in the open sea and had become more difficult to find as the winters passed. The effron, if Elan could find it, might make the birthing easier. It was the reason Elan had to get away from the Caverns.

The section of the sea Elan explored was strangely barren, with vast expanses of blue-gray water only occasionally interrupted by rock ridges. In the distance a rare forest of seaweed grew, and farther still, a craggy range of black mountains jutted up, peaks invisible above the

waves. Elan had searched for two days and had found no trace of the effron. It disappeared because the Merra had once prized it, and now it was as scarce as her kind.

Ironically, even the Ghrismogs who forbade effron's use knew of its curative powers, and a few of them used the leaves, if they dared. To find effron, one had to make long secret forays into the open sea as Elan was doing, but few Ghrismogs cared to face the dangers.

Had Elan's quest been of less importance, she might have taken pleasure in this adventure. The chill of the outlying waters against her skin and the edge of danger in exploring a new place made her blissfully aware of how free she felt, alone. She had been into the open sea only a few times since the awful day long winters before when she had seen the hunter. Though she had grown more adept at travel in unknown waters, she never forgot her fear, and had a scar on her shoulder to remind her. But this journey was not for pleasure. Maadu's health depended on her success, and Elan could not bear the thought of Maadu being taken from her.

As Elan swam, her hair billowed out like sea grass, and she could feel the delicate silverfish that followed her, hovering about. They tickled her breasts and arms and Elan tried to shoo them away. They felt secure hidden between the long strands of her hair, and out of the corner of her eye, Elan saw the flashes of light they reflected from the sunlight above. Because of this the Merra called them lightfish. Since the small fish could be found nearly everywhere in the sea, the Ghrismogs called them nuisances. Elan was glad for their presence. Their familiarity made this distant place less frightening. A small school was collecting around her for protection, and the reason for this soon became apparent. In the distance, the seafloor dropped off, and beyond that sank into the blackest of depths.

She swam nearer the rocky ledge that bordered the abyss, and for a moment she heartened. She thought she spotted the crimson tendrils of the plant, but it was only an abalone, covered with red barnacles. She felt the water temperature change as the chilly currents from below enveloped her.

Though everything about the deep water frightened her, Elan thought that if she searched farther down the face of the rock ledge, she might have better luck, so she

swam over the precipice and toward the shadowy depths. She wasn't surprised when the lightfish disappeared in a single flash.

With an ability shared by most Merra, Elan had sensed the small creatures' fear. There was no need of tongue telling to know it, for their panic swept over her like a small wave. The all-pervading thought was danger! Flee! So they had left her. She didn't blame the lightfish. The smell of fear and death was borne on the currents from below. She sensed it too. No light penetrated that forlorn place, and the shadows that moved through the darkness preyed on all that lived, or were prey themselves. Elan ignored her uneasiness and continued her search. If there was any effron left, she had to find it.

When she felt the brushing tickle against her stomach, she was relieved. It was rare to be alone in the sea. When every creature scattered, it meant a predator hunted and nowhere was safe. The return of the lightfish helped dispel her growing sense of menace. She felt the tickle again, then another near her tail, and she used her voice to coo at them, rather than thinking calming things to them.

"Well, little brave ones, you've come back to keep me co—" Elan gasped as a giant tentacle, nearly as thick as she, snaked around her and constricted. In a rush of bubbles and terror she recognized the Squid. She struggled against it and tried to control the fear that choked her. She kicked her tail fiercely against it, but the huge creature dragged her down into the cold darkness. Another tentacle coiled about her, pinning her arms, useless against her sides. Elan could no longer kick, but she writhed, feeling the Squid's slippery cold skin against her own. She bit into the arm that held her, but the Squid crushed her more tightly, and she cried out. Elan looked at the creature as they sank deeper into the shadows, and caught a glimpse of the sharp beak that would slice her to pieces. She had watched small fish meet the same end in the reefs, had seen their eyes glaze over with death even before they died. She wondered if her eyes held that same dullness, waiting for the inevitable.

The Squid dragged her across the upper lip of its lair and dropped into the dark opening in the rock face. As the creature rose above her, ready to strike, Elan thought distantly that this was a Squid of legend. It was huge. She

felt an odd sensation sweep over her. The horror calmed, and instead she found that her being was filled with the Squid's one purpose at this terrifying moment, and just as she had known the small fishes' fear, she knew this giant's thrill of capturing prey! So in tune was she to its frenzy to feed that she felt her own jaws gnashing, ready to devour herself. The creature seemed to hesitate, though Elan was not sure. She felt strange and removed from time. She felt in her spirit the surrender, staring into the waiting jaws. The Squid gave off its own light, and Elan herself was illuminated by it. Though she was the prey, she could not help but feel awe at the waves of impassioned color rippling across its skin. For now the fever of the hunt and the impending kill glistened red and purple across the Squid's domed head, and the cave was alive with flailing arms. Yet there was hesitation.

Elan was aware of little at this point. She entered a trance state, in which her instincts followed a primal path, a precise code of behavior meant to ensure the survival of her species. The part of her that was aware soared with a joy that had been unknown to her, for here was a link to some past that she had only glimpsed in dreams. When her mouth opened in song, some memory of the words echoed at the moment she heard it for the first time.

The song she sang was ancient, and the melody was a melancholy chant. As Elan's voice filled the cave, the Squid slowly released its grip.

Summer seas, Winter seas,
All that air or water breathes,
One heart beats, another fades,
Dragon's peace is Merra maids.
Start a ripple, change the sea,
All that was will ever be.

The song repeated itself, weaving a rhythmic calm. Caught upon the tranquil pulse, the Squid's coils relaxed and unwound completely. Elan did not try to flee, but felt herself drift down to the sandy floor of the creature's lair.

When the song was over, Elan felt as if she were waking from a dream. She opened her eyes and peered into the gloom around her. The giant Squid nestled in a

crevice in the opposite wall, quiet now, the color of green moss. The tips of several of its arms swayed freely on the currents beneath the ledge. Elan had a memory of her danger and fear, but she had no sense of menace. She thought the song, which she also could not remember completely, might have had something to do with the Squid's growing docile, but she wasn't certain, and she did not know if it would last. The chill of the deep water crept into her.

Elan felt disoriented. She closed her eyes a moment and gathered what sense she could. She detected danger, but it came from the deep water beyond, not from this cave. She quieted her fears and let the looming silence fill her. The only sound was the busy clicking of crabs moving over rock faces. Elan looked again at the Squid and tried to make out its shape and size in the darkness of the lair. There was little she knew about them, except that they were one of the most intelligent creatures in the sea and that they shot black clouds of ink when something frightened them—though she wondered what in the sea could frighten a creature of this immensity. In her mind there echoed a chuckle; it was frightening because the laughter was not her own. She looked at the Squid, trying to read some expression. It seemed as if it was the Squid's amusement she had experienced. Not unlike her being ready, with the mouth of the Squid, to devour herself. She was certain she wasn't imagining this wordless link with another creature. She sensed this fell among the mysteries that drifted about her always, her dreams and the Merra ways, which came to her from other times.

<Did someone teach you the danger song? Or do you simply know it?> Elan darted from one side of the dark lair to the other. She laid her hands over her breast and looked everywhere around her for some other being, some hiding Ghrismog or perhaps a Merra. There was no one in the lair but her. And the Squid. Her heart pounded and she trembled. The sound of another creature's voice had entered her, her head and her chest, and it jolted her.

Elan looked at the Squid, which drifted quietly and watched her with an unsettling intelligence. Could the voice have been the Squid's? It sounded deep, like a male voice, or perhaps just old. It had been a clear thought, not the emotional primal needs like hunger, or

fear, or the need to procreate, which were communicated in nebulous impressions by other creatures.

<You have never learned cross-speaking?> It was the sensation of puzzlement as much as the question that filled her. <You sang the danger song and you have never cross-spoken?> The Squid sounded exasperated now. Though Elan was frightened, she swam closer to the Squid. Blue eyes, eerily like her own but the size of her face, stared back at her.

"I'm sorry, I—" Elan stammered, and she darted back suddenly as the Squid launched himself into the main cave. The thought of escape briefly crossed her mind, but the creature nearly filled the entire space, and the cave mouth was blocked. Even then, there was some other mystery that bound her.

<Something is amiss here,> the Squid said, and leveled his gaze upon her. <Perhaps if I explain—cross-speaking is a gift some have, to speak mind to mind. Merras came most easily to it, though the ability to do it well takes much training. The Merra kept the art alive for many centuries—thought travels near or far—to one if you wish, to many if you are able. Most have forgotten.> Elan must have looked puzzled because the Squid said, <Do not tell me cross-speaking is lost too?> The Squid closed his eyes as if in pain. <There is no Balance in the sea anymore.> When Elan still did not respond, the Squid suddenly looked at her again. She sensed suspicion in him. He was wondering if she might be part Ghrismog.

<You look like a Merra,> he went on in cross-speak. <You look like one I saw a long time ago. Even here in the dark, your skin glows like the moon.> The Squid silently took in the round scar on her shoulder. <But these days with all the blending, one cannot tell a Merra from Mog, or Mog from Merra. Except by the smell.>

"My mother is a Ghrismog, and she doesn't smell," Elan defended Maadu. Ghrismogs ate more flesh than plant and took the smell of fish and oil.

<Perhaps not to you, she doesn't, and she's not your real mother, or you would not know the danger song from the old memory.> The Squid waited, and by the silence, Elan knew he expected her to speak. She did not know how to cross-speak, but perhaps it was something like what she did with the small fish. She had never told anyone, not even Maadu, but with some fish, she could

think what she wanted them to do, to stop, to swim quickly, or to come to her, and she could do this by imagining her voice to them and envisioning what it was she wanted them to do. Often they did as she told them. Could that be cross-speaking? She remembered what the Squid had said about the danger song. She longed to know where the songs she had in her had come from. She would attempt cross-speaking by asking him about them.

<What did you mean, the danger song?> She tried, and she shuddered slightly as she imagined the moment she sang it. She saw the Squid wrap one tentacle around the other in a graceful coil.

<I am first a predator. You should as well blame the moon for rising.> He referred to her recent nearness to death. <It is more clear if you imagine your voice coming from here,> he said, and gestured toward her lungs and high stomach. As the tentacle moved before her Elan noticed with some discomfort that now the Squid scrutinized her. The creature pointed toward her tail. <What color do you call that in your language?> Elan was surprised by the question and looked down at the smooth colored skin that started below her slender waist. She studied it herself, as she was not often wont to do, and had the Squid not been emitting light, they would have seen little. A deep emerald green ran over the back side of her tail and paled toward her front. The whiteness shimmered and was the color of amethysts, or so Tia had called it. Since the Ghrismogs had no such colors, they had no words, and Tia said the Merra words had come from the beginning, when they were brought from the dry world. The squid mimicked the same colors. Elan laughed, for a smug expression had come into his eyes.

<I imagine the Ghrismogs would like to be able to do this,> the Squid said, and Elan grew serious, remembering how much trouble these colors had been for her among them. She purposefully faded out of habit. The Ghrismogs, with their bulging eyes and tails as mud green as seaweed, had always made her feel that her differences were a visible warning to all that she was a lesser being. She had not understood it and had not wanted to believe the Merra were flawed, until the Dispenser told his tale. And the hunter too, a Merra abomination, bringer of death, planting a small seed of self-loathing in her.

<Ghrismogs always feared Merras,> the Squid said, and

watched Elan's surprise. <That is where the problem began.>

"What problem?" Elan asked.

<All of them.> The Squid sighed, his glistening sides billowing in and out. Elan didn't know what the creature meant.

"Will you tell me what the danger song is?" she tried again. "Or the others?"

<Tell me what you know of the Merra—in cross-speak.> The Squid drifted on the surge that entered the lair. Elan thought back to the only real memories she had of her parents. They were vague pictures, and she had still been young when both of them were killed. They, with many other Merra, had left their living caves to harvest a grove near the base of a volcano. The volcano had hissed forth sulfurous warnings for so many winters that none believed it dangerous. It had exploded with a sudden violence that had killed all but a few of the Merra working nearby. A mortally wounded maid had come back to the living caves, and those who had been left behind to tend to Elan rushed to the volcano to retrieve their dead. Elan had been lost in the madness.

Everything Elan knew of the Merra, she had been taught by the Ghrismogs. She recited to the Squid what she had been told since she was young, though shaping the thoughts for cross-speaking took all her concentration.

<Merra are weak and vain. They are gullible and have no ambition—and they are not intelligent.> She tried to remember the rest of the words that Thon had made her repeat. She was not certain why the Squid wanted to hear this, but she went on automatically. <Merra songs are the babbling of fish heads, useless and—>

<Stop,> the Squid said softly. Elan noticed the faint traces of pain, a blue-black flickering across his skin. <So these are the words the Ghrismogs teach you?> the Squid asked. Elan nodded. The Squid studied her again, and she felt shame. A shame for what she was, a Merra, and shame for a past about which she knew little but the legacy of blame.

<Why did you come here, so far from the Caverns?> the Squid asked. Elan noticed her question about the song remained unanswered. She told the Squid about the effron she needed, and then the Squid looked as if he were grieving for something lost. Elan didn't know the shape

of his thought, only the dismal sadness it brought him. <Did you know that before the Ghrismogs, effron, and more plants than you can imagine, grew abundantly?> he asked. Elan wondered if "before Ghrismog" meant when the Merra ruled. The Dispenser had spoken of the lushness of the sea, but all she had ever known was Ghrismog. Though she knew that the songs and other of the old, forbidden things came from a time before Ghrismogs, still, she could not imagine a world different from what she knew.

<I may tell you about it sometime,> the Squid said, <but you must promise to return.> Elan knew it would be a long time before she could get away again. There was always work to do. The Squid sensed her reluctance. <Return, and I will tell you where your songs come from,> he said. Elan's excitement grew, though she was careful not to betray her interest. An eagerness to learn of ways other than Mog ways had gotten her punished often enough and had taught her to be still. Certainly this Squid was ancient, and she had no doubt he knew something of the mystery, the songs that were of a memory not her own. Words she didn't understand, voices and melodies that seemed as familiar to her as her own heartbeat, coming to her at that time of near sleep, of almost dreams. They gave her a solace she could not describe, and tormented her.

The Squid sailed in a billowing motion out of his lair, and Elan followed. She stared as the squid stretched out to its full size. Elan was astounded. The Squid was nearly the size of a whale.

<Will you come back?> he asked again.

<You cannot tell me now?> Elan was torn between her desire to learn and her need to get back to Maadu before it was too late to help her.

<I am not ready to tell you,> the Squid said, and Elan watched as the domed head filled with water and expanded still further. <First I must understand why the Balance has brought a Merra to me.> He expelled jets of water, propelling it rhythmically down. She hurried to catch up and felt a chill, not at the cold, but at hearing the word "Balance" from one so ancient. The Balance was the measure of all that was good and all that was evil in the sea. It filled her with reverence and made her dream of Seadragons.

<Let us find your effron, young Merra, and you will come back if you can,> the Squid said. Elan quit her dreaming and tried to keep pace with the massive creature's bursts and glides. It crossed her mind how close she had come to being devoured by this Squid, and now, swimming beside him, she laughed aloud. She was embarrassed and looked at him. Squids have no mouths with which to smile, but Elan could feel his amusement.

<One should laugh,> he said, <when one has the good fortune to be swimming outside a squid instead of inside.>

A short time later Elan was on her way back to the Caverns. The Squid had led her deeper than his lair, into water dark with threat. She didn't know if she would have had the courage to go much deeper into that perilous place had she not been following him. They had found effron growing outside the hole of a giant grouper. The grouper was so like the Ghrismogs that Elan had been startled by it as it thrust its head out of its hole, curious about these intruders.

Elan increased her speed. Now that she was away from the mysterious presence of the Squid, she was filled with urgency. She had been gone a long time, and no one could predict when the baby would come. Her foster mother's pregnancy had been difficult, and Elan felt uneasy about it, even with the effron she held in her hand. She would still have to find a way to sneak it to Maadu, for Thon was already suspicious. Elan wondered what stories her mother must be inventing to explain the Merra's long absence to her husband. He had always been harsh toward Elan; anything Merra made his lips a bitter line of anger. Maadu tried to soften his cruelties to Elan by explaining that many regarded his raising a Merra in his household a trespass against all that was Ghrismog. He was not so lost that he could find fault with kindness, but Elan brought him many woes, and though her presence in their living cave was due to Maadu's will, Thon displayed his anger only at Elan.

Many winters before, Thon had returned from netting one morning and had told of the Merra child found by gatherers outside the second reef. Maadu knew, as did many others, that Merra children without family were used brutally and sometimes slain. Maadu left the living cave and returned with Elan. She had fought with Thon

for days, but had at last prevailed. As Elan grew older she had asked Maadu why she had helped her, and Maadu said she did not know why. Only that it was a thing that should be done. Though Thon had always made Elan feel more servant than family, he could not stop Maadu from loving her, perhaps more than she loved her own children. Elan knew her strength came from this love.

Despite her surrogate family, Elan had always been aware of a void in herself. Her past was missing, and she mourned for it, as if for a twin sister, lost at birth. Everything Elan learned from the Ghrismogs about her Merra past made her question the memories she clung to and doubt the sense that she had that being Merra was something of which to be proud. But her desire to learn of her heritage burned in her, and even dark knowledge was better than the void. There was much the Squid could enlighten her about, and any small detail would be more than she knew.

As she swam she memorized rock formations and mounds of coral. By the angle of the sun, she knew it was unlikely she would make it back to the Caverns by dark, even though she now swam quickly instead of having to crisscross in search patterns.

She picked up her pace to the maximum she could maintain over a long duration. The powerful strokes of her tail brought her pleasure. She thought about the Squid and her new ability to cross-speak, and she knew she could talk about her experiences with no one. They had the Merra taint to them.

Effron could save a mother's life during childbirth, yet the punishment for being caught with a Merra cure was often worse than the ills it could aid. Maadu had tried to stop her. Elan knew Maadu had finally given in more to get her away from the cave, and from Thon. Tension had been growing between them lately.

Elan had first learned about effron from another Merra named Tia. Tia lived alone in a distant section of the Caverns, and she was attended to by a dolphin, because she was older and blind. Thon warned Elan not to visit Tia, but there were times when Elan had to look upon another Merra face. All those she looked upon were Ghrismog, and she might have forgotten her own if she were not constantly reminded by taunts. Too often, Thon

would learn of her disobedience and punish her, but Elan would not stop. Her visits with Tia were important. They rarely had time to talk. Elan had always meant to ask her about the songs, but Tia seemed reluctant to speak of the old ways.

In the distance, Elan saw a school of dolphins heading in the same direction she was swimming. She was thrilled, and raced to catch up with them. She was a strong swimmer, and if she used all of her strength she was able to keep pace with them for short distances, but never long enough. Their laughter was music.

Once when she was young, she had seen a baby dolphin nearly bite a Merramog child swimming nearby, but the mother dolphin had butted her baby before it had a chance to do harm. Elan had thought them devoid of malice by nature; this had made her realize it was taught to them, generation to generation. Elan knew there was no such thing taught by the Ghrismogs to their children.

Sadly, the dolphins had to be wary of the Ghrismogs because some Mogs hunted them for sport. And because what the Squid had said was true, that it was difficult to tell a Mog from a Merra in this age, the dolphins were often wary of Merra as well. Elan swam as fast as she could and was gaining little on them.

"Wait—wait—" she called to them, but they sped on, disinterested. Then she remembered about cross-speaking and felt a rush of certainty. Dolphins must be able to cross-speak too. She remembered the Merra name that Tia called her dolphin companion. It was Nemu.

Elan could feel her strength waning and it forced her to slow. She concentrated as the Squid had shown her, and tried cross-speaking to the dolphins.

<Wait, Nemu! If you wait, I will sing you a song!> Elan didn't know why she said that, and she grew sad watching the distance between herself and the dolphins stretch out. Her strength was gone, and she had to stop and rest a moment. Still she watched them, and her heart nearly stopped when she saw five or six dolphins break off from the school, speed toward the surface, leaping high over the waves, then dive down again, to swim toward her. They stopped in a circle around her, curious.

<Merra, what say?> one of them cross-spoke. Elan was breathless with her exertion and with the thrill of what was happening. She didn't know what to say.

<Merra to us spoke—> another of them said to several others that had joined the group around Elan. More from the school were doubling back, and Elan could feel all of their inquisitive eyes on her. The dolphins hovered vertically in the water, as she did, their tails swishing to keep them stationary.

<Merra did speak?> An older dolphin swam nearer Elan. She could see the scars on his skin from old wounds, white against his glistening gray skin. All the dolphins who had cross-spoken with her were the older ones.

<Yes, I spoke.> Elan smiled, and unable to contain the euphoric energy that suddenly filled her, she stretched her arms above her head and arched into a graceful backward circle. When she stopped she could hear their squeaks of laughter. Her greeting had pleased them, and she laughed with them. Several of the younger dolphins mimicked her.

<From where you have come?> the scarred one asked. <How you our name did know?> To Elan, their cross-speak voices sounded like children's, while what she heard from some more distant were the high-pitched squeaks with which she was familiar.

<I come from the Caverns—> she began, and heard several of them ask fearfully, <Ghrismogs?>

<Ghrismog she is not,> she heard the old one assure them. <She Merra is.> Something about the way he had said "Merra" and the way he and the others looked at her made her feel proud. She was shocked to realize the Nemu respected her. For a moment it allowed her to forget the new shame that had been growing in her. She remembered she hadn't answered their questions.

<I learned what you are called from a Merra named Tia,> Elan explained. She could sense some of the younger dolphins growing restless. They were full of energy. Elan had rarely seen them be still. She also remembered she had promised to sing them a song. She wanted to sing it before they left her.

Elan closed her eyes and knew immediately which one to sing. It was one she remembered her birth mother singing, unlike the others, which were of some other memory. Her voice was as clear as sunlight as she sang the beginning song.

Earth was new and moon was new,
Land was green and sea was blue.
Split-tail maids were cast from home,
For in them was some wound unknown.
Those who lived fled to the sea
And wept their lost loves mournfully.
But slowly, all that was before,
Became the solace of this shore.
Maids grew at ease among the waves
With sea dwellers they passed the days.
The bravest of them heard the songs,
Yet others wept and feared it wrong.
Like laughter of their once-held babes,
The dolphin called beyond the waves.
And in the Balance, all is right,
The split tails swam, the moon was bright.
The Nemu called, the dance began,
Though this caress was not from man,
Wise, and gentle, strange passions grew,
Pale was the old against the new.
And from this blend the Merra came
Their breath from air and water same.
The Nemu taught them of the sea,
And this their home would ever be.

When Elan finished the song, she knew from their expressions she had pleased them. Elan thought now they would leave in a swish and sweep of gray tails, but they did not. They simply watched her with respectful curiosity. She was warmed by their intelligent eyes, and could sense some kind of expectation from them.

<Soon, a new Between—chosen will be?> the scarred one asked. Elan felt a sting of pain at the word “Between,” a pain as sharp and unrelenting as an eel’s bite. Between, companion to the noblest of all creatures, the Seadragons. It was an honor many competed for, and only one Between was chosen every fifty winters. It was more than an honor, it was a legacy of responsibility.

Even those who did not believe still acknowledged that the sea’s Balance depended upon the well-being of the Seadragons, and it was the Between upon whom the Seadragons depended. But Elan could only dream about Seadragons; she would never be permitted near them.

She tried to keep the bitterness from her answer to the Nemu.

<Yes, it is time for a new Between. Many have begun gathering at the Caverns for the Choosing,> she told them.

<You compete will?> another asked her. Elan cast her eyes down to hide her disappointment and shook her head no.

<It forbidden is?> the scarred one asked.

Elan looked into his kind face. <It is not forbidden exactly,> she began, <but Merras are never chosen. Tia told me once that long ago there were some who tried, but the Ghrismogs—>

<The Ghrismogs them hurt?> The scarred one finished her thought. Elan looked at the Nemu around her and felt their unspoken concern. Even though they had knowledge of the danger involved in a Merra competing at the Choosing for Between, she still felt waves of shame. As if there were some faith she were breaking. <Merra, the Seadragons need,> an old female cross-spoke. <The sea darker grows, and only the Merra and the Seadragons the Balance keep.>

Elan knew that what the old female meant by “darker” had not to do with light but with a slow pervading evil. The Balance out of balance. She knew what the Seadragons meant to the Balance, but she did not know what part the Merra might play. Elan noticed some of the dolphins growing restless again.

<I should go,> Elan remembered with a stab of guilt. The urgency she had felt to get back to Maadu had dissolved in her pleasure at being with the Nemu. She looked in the direction she must travel and knew the vast distance to the Caverns. She wished she didn't have to go back at all. If life in the open sea were not so dangerous, she would stay with the Nemu. There would be no one else around like herself, but she was accustomed to that.

<Take you there we will,> the old scarred one said, and called to a young male. Elan had already noticed the Nemu swimming toward her because he was larger than the others and perfectly formed. She felt the blood rushing to her cheeks. She didn't know if the heat in his intelligent eyes was real or something she imagined. She had heard stories that to dance with a Nemu was to ride passion into the next life and beyond. She had never done

the dance with anyone, and she didn't know anyone who had danced with a dolphin, but she had heard the legends of ardent enchantment. Tender and wild, the dance between a dolphin and a maid could last a night and a day without rest. It was said that a maid's eyes were soft and changed afterward, never focusing on what was, but on what she remembered of the dance. These thoughts, Elan hoped, did not show on her face. She felt as if she had swallowed these images, and they rested like sunlight behind her breast and womb. It was past her time to begin the dance. Elan had known this for some time, and she had heard Thon talking to his sons about it one day when they didn't know she listened. But Elan was faster than any of the Ghrismogs she knew, and she was careful never to let them trap her.

The strong male hovered near her and Elan smiled. She had not read his eyes incorrectly; it was a yearning she sensed in him, and it was very much like her own. She knew they could not act upon these desires, yet it did not seem right to ignore them. Suddenly Elan's worries vanished when the young dolphin burst into a playful sprint, speeding around her until she was spinning in a waterspout of frothing bubbles. When he stopped, Elan drifted, revolving slowly. She was dizzy and could hear some of the dolphins laughing good-naturedly. Some of them started ahead. The young male swam beneath Elan, waiting for her. Elan hurriedly tied the effron in her hair, then reached down and grasped the young dolphin's dorsal fin in both her hands. As she aligned herself with the length of his body, she heard him ask tentatively, <Merra ready?>

He shifted slightly beneath her to turn his gray eye toward her. Elan could not ignore the rush of warmth as the silken skin of his back pressed against her breasts. This Nemu's voice was deeper than the others, rumbling inside her with promises. <This Nemu a Merra never has seen, never cross-spoke.> Elan was so confused by the physical sensations, and so thrilled at the prospect of actually riding a dolphin, that she was silent. She gently dropped her hand down the soft skin of his side, deliciously aware of his warmth. She regripped his dorsal fin, feeling her heart beat.

<Merra ready,> she said, and with that, the dolphin sped off.

Elan held on tightly and watched the sea bottom racing beneath them. Others of the Nemu swam near the surface, some of them leaping into the sunlight. The school traveled at such speed, Elan had to pinch her eyes nearly closed to keep out the forceful water. With her eyes narrowed, the flashes of sunlight that glistened off the sides of the dolphins turned into streaks of speed. Elan could feel her hair streaming back, could feel the effron scratching her shoulder where she had tied it. They were traveling a short time in the distance that would have taken her long into the night. Nothing in her life could compare with this moment.

<Tight hold,> the young dolphin warned her, anticipation in his voice. The Nemu swam upward, and Elan reached her arms around his sides, pressing her cheek against his back. She could feel the powerful muscles beneath his skin, pumping hard as they picked up speed, racing for the surface. Suddenly they broke through the waves and into the warm air. It seemed to Elan that they flew. She took a deep breath of dry air, looked at the clouds, then plunged into the water again. She must have cried out in her pleasure, because she heard the cross-spoken encouragement coming from the school. She felt accepted by them, and her senses soared. What if she had never learned about cross-speaking? At every moment there was another, parallel world around her, and that world might have stayed lost to her if it had not been for the discoveries of this day. Elan knew this flight with the dolphins would be a memory to savor when she returned to her grim existence among the Ghrismogs. But it was more than a memory; she knew somehow it signaled a change in her world, a promise of what lay beyond. Elan tingled with excitement, feeling as if she were giving off light. How could she go back? Thon would beat her for being unable to conceal her happiness. She could not hide the change. She was a different Merra than she had been when she left the living cave.

Though the school was spreading out, Elan saw the scarred one drop to the bottom to pick something up. He was far away, and she wasn't certain, but she thought she saw him pick up a shell. Then he swam up from the bottom and sped ahead.

The young dolphin beneath her still swam powerfully, and despite his having to carry her weight as well, Elan

had felt no tiring in his pace. Being swept with such abandon into his world, and the muscular grace of his moving beneath her the whole time, had aroused her. She marveled at the ease with which he carried her and at the complete trust she felt in him. Though she wouldn't have known what to call the feeling that warmed her, she knew that whatever the dance was, she longed to do it with this Nemu. She had heard her sisters talking about falling in love, and she wondered if that is what could be happening to her. It was like a dream, and there was little else around her but this Nemu. All of her felt focused on this strange urgency to blend with him in these rhythmic movements. She had a stray thought, wondering if this were some other level of cross-speaking as well, like the small fishes' need to flee or the Squid's thrill of prey. Was she consumed by his desires or had she fused him into hers? Wherever it had begun, Elan was aware that the dolphin had slowed his pace until the others, even the slowest of them, were ahead. Elan's heart beat with fear and excitement, and she felt the dolphin trembling too. Perhaps he also weighed what he wanted against what could be. Elan still clung tightly to him, feeling drowsy and thickened by this dream, and when he commanded her to let go, she did so without hesitation.

Losing no speed, the dolphin spun to face Elan, his fins beneath her arms, then turned upright, Elan beneath him. She laced her arms around his silken sides and warmed as his gray eyes studied her, no hint of jest or humor, but with longing. With every powerful thrust of his tail Elan felt his hardness press against her belly, so near the small hidden slit that ran vertically in the soft skin just below her navel. What filled her was something like hunger, but in her womb. His every movement against her was a promise of what was to come, and Elan felt her breath come faster. All she wanted was to begin the dance and finally to burst with the tension that smothered all her senses. A soft moan escaped with her breath and she saw the Nemu flinch at the sound, saw him struggling with her desire and his own.

<If we start, not stop we could.> His voice, and soon the meaning of his words, cut through the haze that enveloped her. Feeling his hardness and urgency, knowing how deeply she was woven into this spell, she mar-

veled at his control. She wished he had not brought her back from her trance of "almost dance."

<I know we could not stop,> she answered. She forced herself further from her dream and looked into the dolphin's eyes. There she saw a restrained echo of her own hunger. She knew this desire must go unanswered.

<You return must?> He knew of her need to get back with the efferon, and again Elan felt a stab of guilt. He took more interest in her duties than she did. She still felt swollen with desire for him.

<Someone needs what I bring. I cannot stay with you.> She had no need to explain her difficulty making this decision. Elan was filled with a bittersweet sadness at a moment that would not be shared. To her it would have been an erotic dream, an extension of a day that had been more magical than real. Her initiation to the dance would have to wait. They swam this way sometime longer, just looking at each other, and finally, on his gentle command, Elan again let go. The brief moment it took for him to turn beneath her before she grasped his dorsal seemed forever. She knew the aloneness she was accustomed to feeling would now have an added dimension as she watched this Nemu and the others swim away.

She started to recognize some of the rock formations she had seen as she swam beyond the third reef two days before. Soon they would be reaching the Caverns. The dolphin still swam powerfully beneath her, and ahead of her she began to see the school regrouping. Her enjoyment dimmed with the dread of what awaited her.

They swam on a short distance farther. Elan looked ahead to see most of the school waiting outside the outermost reef. She was glad they had stopped because she was beginning to be afraid someone would see her riding. For this she had no doubt she would be dragged before the Elders.

They were soon among other dolphins, so with much reluctance she loosened her grip on the young male's dorsal. An odd exhaustion swept over her. She touched cheeks with the young Nemu and turned to the scarred one who had come to say good-bye for the school.

<Merra for the beginning song, the Nemu thank,> he said.

Elan closed her eyes and touched the backs of her fingertips to her forehead in a gesture of respect so

ancient it was rarely used. <I am grateful for the Nemu's company,> she said, and watched as the dolphin dropped the shell he had found into her hand. It was the small and brown kind the Ghrismogs had always told her was bad luck.

<This a luti shell is. Merra long ago, the Nemu with it called.> Elan placed the small shell against her lips and blew. She heard nothing but she saw many of the Nemus' eyes brighten and bodies tense. <If there danger is, Merra the Nemu can call.> Elan had known so little kindness she felt her throat tighten. They still looked at her with concern and respect; she didn't want to leave them. She felt awkward, and her companion, the young dolphin with whom she had nearly danced, sensed her difficulty. He sped around her again, leaving her laughing and spinning in a rush of bubbles.

This was the moment of parting. All of them flicked their tails good-bye. As they swam away, their cheerful voices faded. Once or twice the young male turned to look at her, but finally they were no more than gray specks in the distance. Elan clutched the treasured luti shell to her breast and swam toward the Center Place of the Caverns. She checked to be certain the effron was still hidden in her hair, suddenly remembering Maadu and what she was going back to. Elan was overwhelmed with a sense of loss. Her heart felt pinched, her instincts muddled in the wake of this extraordinary day. Had she been alert, she would have sensed that someone watched her.

3

Maadu's Peril



Menol was surprised when he saw the school of dolphins so close to the Caverns, for they were usually more cautious. Dolphins were the favorite sport of Ghrismogs who enjoyed sport killing and the challenge of taking the intelligent creatures. Menol hadn't seen a school near the Caverns for many winters. He watched them a moment, then returned to his work.

The dolphins weren't taken for food; the carcasses were left for scavengers. Ghrismogs were slow swimmers, and unable to catch the dolphins, so sling spears were used. Spears were the weapon of choice for most Ghrismogs. Knives were carried as well, but sling spears were used for faster prey and sometimes enemies. A sling spear was nothing more than a spear with a blunt tail end and a length of woven sea grass attached to the hunter's wrist. The end of the spear was placed in a cup in the sling, and the line was swung overhead.

Several winters earlier, shortly after Menol had been named an Elder of the Caverns, he had voiced his disapproval of sport killing at a public meeting. He was shouted down by an angry crowd. It had been his first experience of how difficult his duties as an Elder would be—more difficult than for the other Elders. Menol was a Merramog. His mother was not full Merra, but few Mog characteristics had been passed to him, so he had wasted much time trying to convince the many suspicious ones that he was capable of leadership. They would not be convinced. He had since learned to ignore the doubts, spending his whole energies doing what task awaited him. It could not be changed that most Ghrismogs automatically thought him the enemy. He was accustomed to the accusations

about his intelligence and to the fear that he would be biased against Ghrismogs. He was a Ghrismog.

Political power in the Caverns shifted like sand, and Menol knew that many feared he would become the next High Elder. It had been a difficult journey for him. Now, oddly enough, few wielded more power than he. Menol was curious to find he had no desire to be the High Elder. Perhaps that would change.

Menol was charting the locations of some of the larger schools of lightfish. They were territorial, and when the time came, the netters would come to collect them for the Choosing of Between. They would need hundreds of thousands of the small fish, and they had less than two new moons to collect them.

It was considered beneath Menol's station as an Elder to be out charting fish, but it gave him an excuse to be in the open sea, away from the dark caves of the Center Place, away from the other Elders, usually furious about some imagined slight. It had become Menol's task voluntarily. When the netters had complained to Menol about not being able to find the larger schools of fish, he had decided to do it himself.

Menol glanced up again at the dolphins. It was a large school that had stopped to play a moment. Many at the center of the school were still, while others darted to the surface and jumped in the waves. Menol enjoyed them a moment longer and was about to return to his charting when something caught his eye, something bright on the back of one of the dolphins. When he saw it was a Merra, he backed even farther back into the rocks to be certain he wasn't seen. He saw her make the creatures the sign of respect, and they all hovered so intently in the water facing one another that Menol could swear they were talking.

Menol had heard stories about the Merra's ability to talk with other creatures, but he believed that no more than he did any of the other stories that proliferated about the Merra. They had become a symbol of the past that some imagined was more pure. Menol was convinced that the Merra could never live up to the myth that had been created of them by the hopeful. Most held another belief altogether, that all the ills of the present time were the fault of the Merra's weakness. Menol thought placing blame futile and simply another form of surrender, but that there were ills was indisputable.

Menol watched as the old dolphin put something in her hand and the younger dolphin raced around the Merra, leaving her laughing. Her long red-gold hair floated high above her as she spun slowly, her graceful arms outstretched. Menol had never seen a maid so perfect; to see a Merra laughing was an even rarer sight. Her magnificent color and luminous skin, and her laughter made her look enchanted. Menol carefully moved closer, staying concealed so she would not flee.

Perhaps it was the comeliness of his mother and sisters that had shaped his ideas of beauty. He was much alone in his preference for the form of the Merra, in face and body. But unfortunately, the Merra maids had become pale in spirit. What had made them so, Menol did not know, but there wasn't a handful of inner strength to be found in all the true Merras left in the sea. As lovely as a maid might be, she had no more to say than a brightly colored fish.

Menol watched the dolphins dart away. He saw the Merra watching them until they disappeared, and he saw the deep sadness that transformed her beautiful face. Stranger yet—and Menol would have questioned what he saw had he not been watching so closely—her colors faded. The moment she turned toward the Caverns, swimming slowly, it was as if a shadow fell over her. He had never seen one do that before, and he wondered how, or why, a Merra would fade so.

There were several hours of daylight left when Menol gave up his hunting. Many times his thoughts returned to the Merra maid. When he got back he would have to report the locations to the netters before he went to the meeting of the Elders, where the topic of discussion would once again be the Choosing.

Preparations for the competition were well under way, but there were still many details to organize. Menol had not yet been born at the last Choosing, so he had nothing to compare it to, but there seemed to him to be a faint smell of panic on the current. Perhaps it was because much depended upon the outcome and because once the decision was made, it was impossible to turn back.

The Choosing itself was ritualized and any deviation from the accepted competitions had to be planned much in advance. With so much at stake, the Elders were

tense, even more than the rest of the populace. There had been one killing, the father of a Merramog who was known to be a favorite of the competitors. It was rumored that the death was supposed to leave his daughter too disheartened to compete, but the maid had already announced her intention to be in the Choosing despite her mourning.

From the most ancient accounts, Menol knew the Choosing had changed. This was the first Choosing, to his knowledge, when there had been any criticism about those changes. Once the Choosing had had different trials. There was a task given to the maids by the name of the calling. She was to use some power, Menol knew not what sort, to call all living sea creatures to her. From what Menol could learn, the Center Place would grow full of sharks, small whales, turtles, mantas, and everything else that could swim or crawl. In recent times there had been much confusion. The maids could call all of the creatures to them but had no control of them thereafter. The trial had been changed instead to a battle between killer whales. Menol was not yet certain about the rules of the battle, but it sounded to him like little improvement. There were other changes, and more proposed. There were some who grumbled, and Menol hoped that they would silence themselves as the Choosing approached. He knew that those who protested wasted their breath. Only those with power could effect change, and those in power, those whose daughters dominated the Choosing, wanted things as they were. Fairness was nothing when it came to the acquisition of more power. Though Menol agreed with the changes, even his position as Elder could guarantee little if it came to opposing a wealthy Mog family. The Choosing had become a mockery. In this age, it had little to do with the homage due the Seadragons.

The last Between, chosen fifty winters before, had been a Mogmaid from one of the more powerful families. From what Menol had learned of that competition, it was as fair as it could have been, and this maid had won it legitimately. At first her family prospered, the natural result of being related to the Between, but their power and wealth gradually diminished as it became apparent that the Seadragons were not going to lay eggs under her care. Eggs assured the Seadragons' survival, and the Seadragons assured the survival of all that lived in the sea.

Rival families had made good use of her failure to ruin her family's holdings. But what was that, all asked, compared to the looming danger of no eggs? No eggs laid by Seadragons for five centuries. There was a barely concealed panic that had only recently subsided with the hope that a new Between would bring the long-awaited eggs. Meanwhile, the sea got colder and darker.

Menol placed little credence in the myth that once it was only Merras who Betweened, and it was only the Merras who could Between. He considered it more of the same Merra fantasy spread by wishful thinkers. Menol had heard, as most had, the newly prevailing stories that centuries ago there were many Seadragons, not just two, and there were eggs, as dependable as the tides.

The myths, however much truth they held or concealed, had little to do with the present. Now they needed eggs. No one knew how long the Seadragons would live, and the importance of the task of caring for the Seadragons, Betweening for them, could not be left to a race of beings that couldn't maintain its own survival. This to Menol was the telling characteristic of the Merra. If all that had been said about them were true, why had they disappeared?

Menol knew this was not the time to allow panic to affect decisions. As far back as he, or anyone, cared to remember, the Betweens had always been Mogmaids and an occasional Merramog. But never a true Merra. Whatever the Merra might once have been, they were now broken. Despite the avariciousness all Ghrismogs were guilty of, Mogmaids could be depended upon.

Menol had never met a Merra firsthand; he hadn't had the opportunity, and if he had, the association would have been dangerous. His credibility was precarious enough. Despite that, Menol turned to the image in his mind of the Merra he had seen riding the dolphin. He wished he could look at her again.

As he swam nearer the Center Place, Menol chastised himself for his dreaming. Too much Merra blood in me, he thought.

Elan swam home by way of the outermost reef. Few of the Ghrismogs came this way because of the eels. Ghrismogs, after many centuries of living sheltered lives away from the open sea, had lost their sensitivity to the

presence of danger. Elan had seen proof of that. Eels posed a constant, though rarely deadly, threat. Elan was happy that Ghrismogs did not like the open sea. She liked knowing there was a world to which she belonged more completely than the one in which she was raised. The open sea. The perfect home for an outcast.

Elan felt again in her hair for the effron to be certain it was concealed. She was relieved to be this close to home, and closer to being able to help Maadu. Maadu had always been so kind. Elan had lost track of how many times Maadu had protected her from Thon's rage, or one of the children's cruelty. Elan hated to see her foster mother in pain, and did not want to think of how unpleasant her life would become if Maadu were to die with this child.

Elan swam quickly on and pressed the luti shell to her lips without blowing. It gave her a comfort and sensual pleasure, which warmed her, and triggered a sudden thrill at the memory of her ride on the dolphin. She wondered if she would ever see the Nemu again, if she would ever feel like that again.

She glanced into a nearby clump of trees. She wasn't certain she saw it, because it was visible for just a moment in the swaying vegetation, but it looked like a sea pear. She hadn't seen one for a long time. Like the effron, they had nearly disappeared. The pears were not forbidden, but no one knew how to grow them anymore, so the only ones left were the wild ones. Maadu loved sea pears most of all.

Elan kept her eyes on the place as she swam toward it, for as the water surged, so did the fluid trees, and the pear disappeared and reappeared before her eyes. When Elan reached the tree, she knew this was indeed a special day. There was not one, but two sea pears. She remembered her birth mother used to thank the Balance when they found something good.

As she swam, she tied one in her hair, near the hidden effron, and held the other. Elan crossed quickly to the second reef, admiring her two treasures, her luti and Maadu's pear. She came to the inner reef crossing point, and soon after passed the perimeter of the Caverns.

There were many Ghrismogs swimming, and Elan went her way without looking at any of them. She felt as if they stared at her, and she began to wonder if she might look peculiar.

The fastest way to the living cave of Thon and Maadu was through the Grand Chamber. She had not been back there since she had been taken by the maids for her punishment. She marveled at how one of the darkest days of her life had led to one of the most miraculous.

The Grand Chamber of the Elders was an ancient cavern of colossal size, left over from Merra times. Cutting through the Grand Chamber was somewhat dangerous because it seemed the most foul Mogs congregated there. Elan hesitated. If she was being stared at, if there was any chance some sign of what she had done and seen showed upon her, perhaps she should go another longer way. She looked up and saw that several passed her without notice, so she made up her mind to go the more dangerous, faster, way. There was another reason she risked the passage through the Grand Chamber. It gave her the opportunity to look at the one thing she considered the most beautiful in the sea. If she was not allowed near the Seadragons because she was Merra, at least no one could stop her from paying homage to their likenesses.

Merra artists, centuries before, had left a record of their abilities, a craft now dead for countless winters. They could chip coral from the reefs of many different hues and textures, and they were able to cement them to the cavern walls without killing the living coral. Over time, the corals grew into the patterns envisioned by the artists. The most magnificent of these living depictions was the life-size image of the Seadragons. It stretched the entire length of the colossal cavern, and Elan remembered the first moment she had laid eyes on it as a child. She had become paralyzed with a feeling of reverence, even though she had only vague memories of her parents telling stories of Seadragons. Thon had grown angry, and Maadu had had to soothe him, to allow Elan time to stare at them.

Elan saw the huge dome of the Grand Chamber and swam to a small, little-used entrance near the top. Often she was lucky, and no one looked all the way up to see her there. Most Ghrismogs passed by the Seadragons showing little interest.

Elan stopped once again in front of the mural to look upon the magic creatures whose sorrowful eyes shone with the effort of maintaining all that was good in the sea. They had a saying: "As the Seadragons go, so goes

all that is wet." Elan swam toward the male's head, high up in the top of the cavern. The full length of Elan—and she was long for a maid—did not reach from his eye to the base of his powerful jaw. She leaned her head against his and felt the gratitude swell in her for the grace in the Balance that had allowed her a day such as this. She was just wondering if Seadragons understood cross-speaking when she heard a barking from below her.

"You up there—Merra!" Elan glanced down at the sandy floor of the cavern. "Come down here, Merra." There was a hideously fat Ghrismog below her, one of advanced rank, or so he seemed by his opulent draping. His bulk would not allow him to swim up to her, so he stayed below and bellowed.

"You aren't allowed to look at the Seadragons, your curses keep them from laying—come down here, I say!" Elan saw his wide mouth laboring at breathing, opening and closing like a grouper's. Elan knew it was not forbidden for her to be here, but perhaps it was the coming Choosing that made the Mogs more belligerent toward Merra. Besides, baiting Merra was good sport, and no one was likely to come to her defense. If Elan had been in the open of the Center Place, perhaps she would have sped away. But that was impossible here. She finally swam to him.

Elan cast down her eyes, as was a custom for all maids, but only forced upon Merra. It was the one demand Elan found no problem complying with, for she found many of the Ghrismogs revolting to look at, and keeping her eyes downcast was safer. Better they did not see the disgust in her expression. When he neared her, she could smell him. There was something about him that frightened her—a cruel edge to his voice and the certainty of one who held much power. She thought this one was probably an Elder. She had never been able to get close to the Elders' podium at the ceremonies in the Center Place, but she did remember one of his girth. The longer she waited, the more frightened she became. She had no way of knowing if the effron was truly hidden in her hair. She didn't know what they would do to her should she be caught with it.

"What have you got there, Merra?" With her eyes cast down Elan could not see to what he referred, and her heart pounded with such violence she could see it be-

neath her breast. At last she saw his pudgy yellow finger waving toward the sea pear. She was terrified he would ask about her luti shell too.

"Ah-hah, a sea pear! Give it to me." The Mog snatched the pear from her hand and stuffed it into his mouth, spreading it over his hanging jowls. Elan waited until he was absorbed in his feast to drop the luti shell to the sand beneath her. She saw where it fell. If he would only leave her alone. She glanced up briefly to see several small fish rush from nowhere to eat the floating pieces of fruit he had somehow missed. The Mog swiped at them, catching one, and popping that too into his mouth. Elan looked down again and could feel his bulging eyes on her. She knew that look, a different sort of hunger. She tried to make her colors as dull as possible. He was repulsive, but because she was Merra, no one would say a thing if he were to force her to come to his living cave. The thought sickened Elan. What if he saw the effron? She glanced up again.

"What have you dropped there?" the Mog asked.

"Where?" Elan's hands trembled, and she held them behind her.

"There below you in the sand. I want to see it," the Mog demanded. When Elan didn't move, the Mog became enraged. He looked as if he would strike her and Elan tensed for the blow. It did not come, and this told her something about him. It was commonly thought to be bad luck to strike a Merra, but only those who secretly believed the Merras a threat paid heed to the warning. Even Thon believed it, sometimes.

"I said I want to see what you dropped!" he screamed. Elan drifted down to pick it up.

"It's nothing, just an ugly shell I found. I dropped it because I don't want it anymore." Elan had no idea if her voice sounded as uninterested as she was trying to make it sound. The Mog grabbed the shell from her hand and Elan felt suddenly ill that he had touched her and the luti. She also felt empty without it in her hand. She looked up to see the Mog studying her shell. He held it to his nose to smell it. Elan couldn't bear to watch him.

"It is ugly, but then so am I." He laughed without merriment. "And since you seem so anxious to be rid of it, I think I will keep it as a remembrance of you," and he reached out to caress her face, but she jerked back

before he could touch her. She pulled her hair about her and looked away.

"You're certain you don't want it?" he taunted. Elan wondered if he might know about the luti and what they were once used for. She shrugged. He was trying to bait her, and she would never have had the courage to face him like this if she had not been so desperate to keep the luti the dolphins had given her. She heard him breathing harder.

"Get out of my sight!" he screamed, and Elan saw him throw down the shell in his anger. She ached to pick it up, but when she looked at him again, she saw that the Elder's neck was bulging with veins, his eyes filled with his hatred of her.

"I said get out!" he repeated, the loathing in his voice born of an anger at some memory far worse than Elan's trespassing. Elan started to swim away and waited some time before she looked back. When she did, she saw that the Ghrismog had started on his way, but because his girth made him slow, he was not far beyond her shell. Without hesitating, Elan shot back in a rush of speed and picked up her luti from the sandy floor. With a lightning flash of her tail she burst back toward the exit in the dome of the cavern. Behind her she heard the Ghrismog yell.

"Stop, thief—stop her!" Elan didn't look behind to see if anyone followed her. She swam as fast as she could toward the cave of Maadu and Thon, gripping the luti in her fist, thanking the Balance.

Passing through the many winding and darkening passages, Elan at last came home. She paused a moment outside the entrance net to untie the other sea pear from her hair. She was glad she still had it to cheer Maadu with, and it would help her sneak the effron to her mother. She would have to leave the effron hidden in her hair until there was no one else in the main cave. If any of them saw the plant, all would have been for nothing. No matter what Maadu's wishes might be, they would not let her take it. Elan wiped the memory of the Ghrismog from her mind and entered with a smile that would not trouble her already burdened mother.

When Elan swam through the entrance net and into the main cave, she knew immediately that Maadu's condition had worsened. Maadu had taken to her sleepnet,

and did not look well. Her eyes, which usually twinkled with warmth, were dull with the effort of concealing her pain. The skin around her mouth was pale and tight. Elan was moved by the relief and fondness that lit her mother's face the moment she saw her.

"I was worried about you, child," her foster mother said. Maadu reached her thin fingers through the delicate web of her sleepnet and wiggled a hello. When the others were about, they could not risk a show of more affection.

"I had them set up my sleepnet here in the main cave so I didn't miss anything." A woven mesh of sea grass kept the Merra or Mog from drifting while asleep. Elan had made this sleepnet for Maadu. It had taken Elan moons in the private darkness of her room to fashion the knots and patterns. Weaving was the only Merra art still allowed. Maadu considered the sleepnet her most prized possession; this, everyone in the family knew. Tsui, Maadu's youngest daughter, had torn it twice in spite. No matter how much time Maadu spent with Tsui, the child was still jealous of Elan. Elan had patiently mended it both times. It was a useful art undersea, where everything not contained drifted away.

Elan held up the sea pear for her mother to see.

"Look what I found for you." Elan swam toward her mother's bed to be near her. "I found the other too," she whispered. Maadu looked quickly toward the other rooms.

"Careful," she warned. "Thon and the others are back from hunting." Just as Maadu finished speaking, her husband, Thon, appeared from another section of their living cave with their two grown sons. The three of them looked alike, their tails as dark as moss and their broad chests covered with hair. There was a cruel thrust to Thon's chin when he saw Elan near Maadu.

"Who told you you could stay away so long?" Thon yelled. Elan knew he was angry because her ability to care for herself in the open sea was an affront to the Ghrismogs, who only ventured out among others on the hunt.

Elan said, "You needn't have worried," and Maadu cringed. Elan's tone had been heavy with sarcasm. Thon stared at her threateningly.

"I told the silly maid that if she must make an aloneswim, she should best make herself useful and find me a pear. I told her not to return without one, and it

has taken her two days." Maadu's indignation was for her husband's benefit. She and Elan knew the safest way was to feign a dislike for one another. It was a game they almost enjoyed. Elan held up the pear with her eyes downcast, and she heard Thon grunt.

"She grows more headstrong by the day—she needs a beating," he said.

Elan ignored him. She knew the difference between his threats and his intentions. She moved to where they kept the cutting shells. "I'll cut it for you, Mother."

Thon and his sons had just returned from hunting, and Thon reached into the basket that hung from his waist and pulled out a fish. Knowing that Elan had brought Maadu the food she was most fond of, Thon had to make an offering too. Elan watched from the corner of her eye. Strangely enough, the gesture saddened her. Whatever his reason, Maadu knew she must accept his offering. Thon took one himself and bit into the head, his eyes on Elan. Maadu, for Elan's sake, took a small bite of her fish. Elan felt sorry for Maadu, who, she knew, felt sick to her stomach. Thon went into another section of the cave, closely followed by his sons. With him went the tension from the room.

Maadu pushed the fish away and spat out the piece she had been holding in her mouth. Elan heard her laugh softly.

"He loves me," Maadu said, smiling at Elan. Elan waited until she could hear them all in the other rooms of the cave before removing the effron from her hair. She hurriedly sliced it into pieces, and along with the slices of pear, she pushed them gently into the hollow of a spiral shell. Elan was just finishing and held the shell to bring it to Maadu when Thon came back with their daughter Tsui.

"Tsui is hungry, Elan," Thon informed her.

"She'll be done with my pear in a moment." Maadu kept the tension from her voice.

"What does Elan have?" Tsui asked her father.

"A pear. It's for your mother; she's sick," Thon answered gruffly. Maadu and Elan exchanged a brief worried glance.

"I want some," Tsui whined.

"There is only one, dear," Maadu explained. Elan tried to hand the fruit and the forbidden effron to Maadu through the sleepnet.

"The daughter can't have one piece of your precious fruit?" Maadu couldn't answer.

"I'll find her a piece," Elan started to say, but Thon grabbed the shell from her and shoved it toward Tsui.

"She can find her own." Thon watched Elan as Tsui poked inside, greedily looking for the biggest piece.

"I think I saved a big piece over here," Elan tried, but it was too late.

"What are these red things?" Tsui asked, and put one in her mouth, not waiting for an answer. She quickly spat it out.

"What's the matter?" Thon demanded, distracted by the tenseness he sensed in his wife and Elan.

"I don't like it," Tsui whined, twisting her face. "It's not a pear." This time Thon heard what she said and looked for himself inside the shell. He started pulling pieces of the fruit and effron out, letting them float away on the current. Elan was sick, not at what would happen to her, but for Maadu. Should she have waited for the middle of the night? How could she have let this happen?

"What is this?" He looked suspiciously at Maadu and Elan. "Some kind of Merra poison?" This time he pulled Elan by the hair and snarled into her face, "What are you trying to do to my mate, Merra?" He nearly howled the word "Merra." Both his sons came in for the spectacle. "You think because she cares for you I won't hand you over to the guards? This time I will make them punish you the way you deserve."

"Make them lock her up," Tsui joined in, her voice shrill.

"Maadu didn't know, I was going to try to sneak it to her," Elan managed to say, though he pulled her head back so viciously her throat was closing. Elan hoped that Maadu went along with this lie; it would be easier for both of them if Thon believed there was no conspiracy.

"Don't hit her on my account." Maadu artfully directed the conversation toward the old superstition. "We want no bad luck in this family's cave." Elan kept the pain from showing on her face because this was what angered Thon's sons most of all. When he beat them they always whimpered. Elan would not cry out. She did not know what made her so stubborn, because he beat her longer than he did his sons, who begged for him to stop. Then gave her neck a final yank and shoved her. Elan

drifted upward with the force, and all she had eyes for were the last of the effron pieces floating away on the current.

"Now, go to your bed," Maadu commanded in an imperious tone. Elan ached, knowing how much of Maadu's strength was wasted on this show for Thon. "And tomorrow you will find me a pear, and only a pear! And it had better not take you two days to do it. Now get out of here." Thon and the others watched as Elan glided by them and into her own room.

It was dark in her section of the living cave, and Elan found her sleepnet and slipped inside it, pulling the softness of it against her cheeks. Thon's other children kept caged deepwater glowfish in their rooms, the kind that did not explode at the pressure change. These gave off light. Elan had the only room that had a crevice opening to the outside. Too narrow for anything to pass through, but enough so that when the moon was full, she could see by it.

She heard her foster brothers retelling what had just happened as they swam back toward their own rooms. She wondered why they didn't like her. Probably to please Thon. The only one of the children who cared little for Thon's blessing was Mara, the eldest daughter. She was the most like Maadu, and had been kind enough to Elan. Elan heard her enter.

"Maadu had me bring you this." Mara pushed a fistful of sea vegetable through the sleepnet. Elan was grateful. She couldn't remember when she'd eaten last.

"Thank you, Mara," Elan whispered. "Is Maadu all right?"

"She should sleep, but the pain will not let her," Mara said. Mara knew Elan was looking for the effron, and she knew it would have helped. "When the others left, I tried to look outside for the effron, for any small piece of it, but the currents have taken it, and it is too dark. I'm afraid for her, Elan."

"You'd better go before they catch you here," Elan whispered. Their concern for Maadu was all they had in common.

"You'll look for more tomorrow?" Mara asked.

"I'll try," Elan said, and watched as Mara swam out toward her own cave room. Elan ate her stolen dinner with little appetite and lay back in her sleepnet, watching

the slit of light in her ceiling until the moon had passed. Complete darkness surrounded her; unlike the others, she found peace in the darkness.

In that half time of almost sleep, Elan heard her songs. She heard distant voices calling her. Wondrous songs that pulled at the fragments of memory that lay in her. They made her feel secure, and she longed for them tonight.

All she could think about was the effron floating away. She didn't know where she could get more of it, but she had to. She didn't have time to swim all the way back to the Squid's lair. The baby could come before she returned.

Elan felt her luti shell and remembered the Nemu. What about Tia? she wondered. Would Tia, or her Nemu know where to find effron? Elan knew at least that would be a good place to begin.

Through her worries at last crept sleep, and the echoed sensations of what she had experienced that day. She felt the powerful muscles of the dolphin beneath her and the surge of arousal. The image of the Squid drifted into her dreams. The answers the Squid promised became a destination, a point toward which to swim. She was unfamiliar with the concept of having something to look forward to. The life she was accustomed to was a long string of days filled with restrictions and duties. Now, if Maadu would get well, Elan could plan ahead. They could go away and live with the Nemu.

And into her dreams came the voices, enveloping her in their melancholy mumbling. Sometimes as pieces of songs, and sometimes as unintelligible words in which were the answers to all the seas' mysteries, and always beckoning just beyond her reach. Tonight Elan swam toward them on the back of a Nemu; she leaped over the waves and the mumbling sounds mingled with the laughter of the dolphins. This dream was hers, this time was hers, and tomorrow she would hunt again for the effron. The nagging doubt that she would be too late was left behind in a trail of spinning bubbles.

4

The Elders Meet



Menol looked about him in the meeting chamber. It was a large room hewn from stone, and so deep in the Caverns, there was no light save for that which came from the glowfish. There were many of the grimacing brown creatures swimming listlessly in their confines. The cages were attached at intervals to the walls of the chamber. The glowfish were sightless, and came from waters at least one hundred tails deeper than the level at which the Ghrismogs occupied the Caverns. Since there was no light in the deep water by which to see, eyes had become superfluous. Strange knobby scales had taken the place of eyes, and one could always tell when a new supply of glowfish had been brought in by netters to replace the old, because they had not yet learned the confines of their cages and were constantly thumping into the walls.

The light from them was bluish, and gave all in the chamber a sinister look, even the maids who observed from the outer edges of the room. All of the Elders were there, many of them arguing. Most of them appeared sinister, blue light or none. Menol felt closed in in the chamber. It had not grown smaller he knew, but he had felt free beyond the third reef. The sea was vast and fresh upon the tongue, and this chamber was more like a prison.

Menol had the clearest picture drift into his thoughts, of the Merrra, and of her enchanted face. He felt someone watching him and looked up to see Edam, the High Elder. All the others drifted within the confines of their belts, waiting near a long low protrusion of rock at the center of the chamber. Menol moved to his place and smiled at Edam, whose patient expression held a warmth toward the younger Elder he showed to few.

The other Elders were threatened by the unspoken closeness between them. Menol knew of no other Ghrismog like Edam. The power inherent in the position of High Elder did not distort his sense of fairness and reason; he had proven himself to be a wise leader on countless occasions.

Menol knew he was lucky to consider the High Elder a friend. They respected each other's judgment. Menol could only marvel at the way Edam was able to keep the Cavern from warring within its walls, and at the same time stay ahead of the many treacheries of the Elders. The two exchanged a flicker of a smile, then Edam looked around the large room.

"Once again, we must discuss the subject of placing the net in the bottomless hole. There are other hazards inherent in our attempting to alter the tests of the Choosing, but the outcry from portions of our populace cannot be ignored, nor can we postpone our decision any longer." There was loud agreement from the crowd that had come to witness the proceedings.

"Who has requested the safety net?" asked Tuan, an Elder with the prominent eyes of a pure Ghrismog.

"The Nurf-ma, Ondorts, no doubt!" someone in the audience yelled out, "The rich keep the power—"

"You will all be given a chance to voice your opinions. Disruptions will only delay that opportunity." Edam's powerful manner silenced them.

"It was the Nurf-ma," said Kado.

"It matters not from where the request has come," Edam said.

"Certainly," Tuan agreed, but seemed more concerned now that he knew to whom he might be answering, should he vote against the new proposal. This subject had been brought up twice before, and postponed. Menol knew that fear of the power these families wielded kept the other elders from acting, and their indecisiveness made him angry.

"The bottomless hole, the third trial of the Choosing of Between, has always been the most dangerous of the tests. It is not surprising that it has become the subject of debate." Edam tried to regain control of the meeting. Menol knew the Choosing had once been considered merely a way in which the Balance revealed the one true Between. It was said that the identity of the true Be-

tween was known within the Balance from the day of her birth. The Choosing no longer served such a purpose. Menol suspected, with the manipulation of the tests and the Elders, that the Choosing was now nothing more than a somewhat frightening experience that a maid, necessarily from one of the wealthier Mog families, would have to suffer before she was handed the title of Between. A few of the Elders were honest, but most of them would base this decision, as they did all their decisions, on how the issue affected them personally. They were not concerned with how their shortsightedness might affect the future. He had to speak.

"To place a net in the hole would make the Choosing more a mockery than it already is." Menol looked at each of the Elders. "With the exception of the High Elder, there is no more important responsibility in the sea. With respect to Edam, the High Elder keeps chaos from our door, and is responsible for the well-being of all those in the Caverns. But the Between holds something much more fragile in her hands—with her rests the Seadragons, and the Balance itself."

"But we can't ask that the most powerful Mog families risk the loss of daughters in this dangerous competition when they are useful as matches in political marriages," Kado persisted. His reach of the Caverns held many of these families of which he spoke, those who would be sending most daughters to compete for the coveted position.

"Then they shouldn't be competing." Menol looked Kado in the eye until the Elder could no longer hold his gaze.

"It is more than the highest honor, you all know Menol is right," Edam took over calmly. "If we give the position away, we not only diminish that honor, but we jeopardize our futures." Edam looked around at the eleven faces of the Elders in the chamber to see which of them agreed or disagreed.

"I, for one, think the net would be a bad idea no matter how much the families protest," said Groff. Menol watched as the grossly fat Ghrismog played with the pearl ring on his finger. Groff, the worst of them, must have a self-serving reason for such a position—especially one so unpopular among those families whose support he depended upon. Perhaps, thought Menol, Groff had become so powerful he had no one to fear.

Groff had tried on several occasions to take control of the Elders, and the Caverns. Edam had managed to outmaneuver him, though the odds were in Groff's favor because he would embrace any treachery to have what he wanted.

"The hole has always been an efficient manner in which to rid ourselves of any Merra foolish enough to compete," Groff went on. Several in the crowd hissed their disapproval through their teeth, and Groff's head snapped to see who dared. So that was it, Menol thought. Groff's mouth opened and closed as he labored for breath. Menol and Edam had often pondered the basis for Groff's loathing. Where most simply dismissed the Merra as foolish, primarily because there were too few to fear any longer, Groff seemed to pursue them with malice.

"This net has little to do with Merra, since there is no record of the last time a true Merra competed," Edam stated. Menol thought again of the Merra maid he had seen. It was widely believed that if a Merra were to compete, sending her down the hole would be sending her to her death. It was commonly thought that the Merra heard voices calling them into the hole, voices they were unable to resist. Menol had some difficulty believing this, though he would not dispute that danger was involved. Menol had seen the hole, and it had revitalized his fading belief in the existence of good and evil. Without eyes or ears, Menol would know that what came from the mouth of that hole was foul.

Another of Menol's duties had been to check the hole to be certain the abyss was clear for the passage of the maids. The day he had gone, he had heard the roaring. The hole itself looked like a wound in the earth, and the stench from it was hideous. The nearer Menol swam to the opening, the more the hair on his arms stood out. As he left the morbid valley, no amount of rubbing with sand would take the lingering smell from his skin.

"It is the risk the maid must take if she hopes to wear the mantle." Groff spoke slowly, his voice so soft, many had to lean forward to hear him. "It is not our responsibility if one or another is lost in the competition. Each maid, and her family as well, knows that so high an honor must necessarily be bought with sacrifice."

Menol knew Groff would never go near the hole. Menol had respect for anyone who had the courage to face the

odious blackness. At least when the Mogmaids panicked it was not because of any voices, but because in their fear, they would lose all perception of up or down. In the darkness, one could not follow bubbles upward, and if the maid chose the wrong way, she could be swallowed up in the crushing depths of the hole. Menol did not blame them for wanting a net. But adding it would change the Choosing, making it even more difficult to establish the true Between.

Groff opened his mouth to speak again and was startled by a shrill scream from one of the maids at the perimeter. Everyone stared as she cried out hysterically.

"How can you, how can you speak so calmly of our deaths? It isn't fair, you would not face it! Why must we?" Edam loosened his drift belt and swam to the maid. She quieted at his approach, and with an arm about her trembling shoulders, he led her back among the other Elders. All eyes were upon them. Menol marveled at the kindness that could soften Edam's gaze. The maid calmed, and seemed embarrassed. She shrank from Groff as they swam by him.

"Anyone who does not fear the abyss must be foolish as a flounder." Edam's voice forgave her the outburst. Edam looked closely at her, then at the faces of the observers in the chamber.

"I can see that many of you are young. You are fortunate. You have experienced little suffering, and let us hope you will ever be spared it. But we, who have seen the shadows creep into our lives, do you little good when we protect you from the valuable lessons we have learned. If one knows how to look upon it, there is much wisdom to be had in the study of history."

"History is ours to make," Groff interrupted.

"Let him talk!" another yelled from the audience.

"No one among us knows how long Seadragons live." Edam ignored Groff and the outburst. "Never before in our history have we had to wonder about such things. In the past, there were eggs. The young Seadragons matured to take the place of the old, who simply swam away and did not return. Now the dragons will not lay. No one knows what will become of the Balance if we see the last of the giants.

"The wisest among us have spent lifetimes trying to decipher the link between Seadragons and the Balance.

None have found the answers, yet the fact remains that our existences are interdependent. All of us who are older have heard the stories our parents have passed down to us of the last tragedy." All in the chamber were still, but for the glowfish in their cages. "For those of you who do not know"—and he looked pointedly at the Elders around the table—"for those of you who need to be reminded of the consequences of our actions tonight, those whose closed eyes to the past will have us repeating again what might be avoided, please allow me this.

"A Mogmaid named Lavitte was Between. She was one of a large and extended family, the most powerful at the time. Her beauty was renowned, though few knew how her newly won power would twist her. Some said it was her terror in the hole that changed her, some said she had always been deceitful, but nonetheless it was our predecessors, Elders of that long-ago time, who chose her from the other maids to be the Between.

"Those whose duty it was to ensure that her responsibilities as Between were performed had been secretly paid to be elsewhere. She cared not for the Seadragons, or for the honor of her position. With no one knowing but a treacherous few, this neglect went on from one winter well into the next. Before there was chance to prepare, the storms hit, storms more violent than any before. By now, some suspected the reason, and when a party was sent out to find the Seadragons, it was discovered that indeed Lavitte had abused her sacred position and had left the dragons without care. Both the shedragon and the male were weak from loss of blood to the leechfish, and when they were discovered they were fending off attacks from white sharks, blues, and every other kind of predator. As ever, evil was ready to tip the Balance, and had the situation gone on much longer, we might have had our final proof that it is the Seadragons who uphold what little good there is in the sea."

Menol watched closely as Edam turned his attention to each of the Elders around the chamber. It was obvious that all of them had heard the story, but Edam wanted this vote, and he was going to be certain they knew why.

"The Caverns still bear the scars of that time. The storms and ensuing destruction could not be stopped. By the time the Seadragons had been nurtured back to health we had lost nearly half our population, to injury, starva-

tion, and the incessant shark attacks that followed each storm. There was much suffering."

"What has this to do with the hole?" Groff shouted.

"It has everything to do with the hole," Edam answered calmly. "Would the net we are asked for deep in the abyss take us closer to, or farther from, the disaster Lavitte brought upon the Caverns?" Edam looked at the Elders and at the maid who drifted near him. She dropped her head and looked ashamed. Edam patted her arm before he went on. "As the Seadragons go, so goes all that is wet. It is imperative that we make the best choice possible of Between, and should we give in to the pressure to make the Choosing more convenient to those who would use it as a means by which to improve their status, we may leave our young a dark legacy."

Menol kept the triumphant smile he felt to himself, not wishing to break the eloquent spell Edam had just woven. Menol could see he had touched even the most cowardly of the Elders.

"I say the elements of the test remain as they have been. The ritual must not be tampered with," Kado added, a new fervor in his bearing.

"Perhaps it is the Seadragons who have changed their ritual?" Groff suggested. His mouth twisted in appreciation at his own morbid humor, "No more eggs."

Edam quickly cut through the discomfort that followed. "Let us hope they have not." He looked around the chamber once again. "Shall we vote?"

The Elders raised hands, in favor and opposed, and it was decided, nine votes to three, that there would be no net in the bottomless hole.

5

The Garden



When Elan awoke, she stretched happily. The restful depth of her sleep had allowed some respite from her worry over Maadu. Her thoughts of the previous day were so wondrous that they mingled with remnants of her dreams and took on similar unreal qualities. But the day had been real, and clenched in her hand was the luti to prove it. She looked at the shell and held it next to her cheek.

Where could she hide it? She had no place of her own to keep things. Often when she found something special, like a pearl or crystal, or when she made something useful, Tsui hunted through her room until she found what she wanted, and Elan rarely saw it again. Once Elan had discovered a split-tail wreck and on it had found an old rusted blade. She had polished it on rock and in the sand until the blade shone. Then she had fashioned a new handle for it, carved from mother-of-pearl. Elan also made a sheath, but she had no plans to wear such a thing, knowing it was forbidden to Merra. It made no difference that she did not wear it. Thon would never admit to wanting anything Elan had made, so he simply forbade her to possess it at all. He had hidden it for several moons, then started wearing it boldly, as if Elan might have forgotten it was hers. It hung in the main cave at night.

Because she had never before possessed anything that was truly hers, the luti shell was treasured. It was her link to a magical day, a day when, for a few moments, she had felt proud of being Merra. Though she might never use it for what it was intended, the mere holding of it made her feel happy.

Elan took several strands of her hair and used them to tie the shell just behind her neck. That would have to do until she could find a better way to carry it.

She slipped from her sleepnet and noticed her arms were sore from her ride on the Nemu. Elan wanted to check on Maadu before she left to hunt for more effron—and another pear, if she was lucky.

The moment Elan entered the main cave she felt the fear fall over her. Both Tsui and Mara were hovering near Maadu's sleepnet.

"She doesn't look well," Mara said to Elan, trying to mask her concern. Elan swam quickly to Maadu's side.

"Go away, she doesn't want you here," Tsui yelled. Elan ignored her, and when Tsui yelled again, Maadu placed her hand over her child's to distract her. Elan went to the food area and automatically began her duties, placing portions of sea vegetables and pieces of the fish Thon had caught the day before into spiral shells for the others to eat.

"I wish you all would stop telling me how sick I look. I wake up feeling fine, then my husband and my children say 'she doesn't look well' and suddenly I feel like the clam gone foul in his shell." The others laughed but Elan could not.

Jud and Lok came for their meals, as did Tsui. Elan didn't know where Thon was. Elan watched her mother and sensed the worry that Maadu successfully concealed from the others. It made her anxious to get to Tia. Where could she find more effron?

"You have not forgotten you promised to find me a pear, daughter." Maadu wagged a frail finger.

"I haven't forgotten," Elan whispered.

"Go get her pears. Go now," Tsui ordered. Elan caught the look Tsui gave her older brothers, looking for their approval.

"She can go when she wants. She has to eat something," Mara told her younger sister. Mara was no match for little Tsui.

"She doesn't get to eat, she was bad yesterday. I want her to go now. Go now!" Tsui pouted when she saw that Elan was untouched by her show of bravado. Elan knew a fight was imminent, so she took Maadu's hand.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," she whispered, and kissed her mother on the forehead through the sleepnet.

"Be careful, my child," Maadu said, and Elan knew it was a measure of how weak Maadu had become that neither of them bothered to conceal the love they felt for each other. Jealousy made Tsui pull at her mother's hand possessively.

"I'm not going anywhere, little one," Maadu told her.

Elan swam out of the main cave and into the long passageway.

As Elan approached the last tunnel that opened upon the Center Place, she tried to control her sense of helplessness. It was not unusual for Mogs and Merra to live close to a century, and Maadu had seen nearly sixty winters. That was not considered old, but it was old for having a child. When Elan had told Tia that Maadu would have another baby, Tia seemed surprised and had mentioned to Elan that perhaps she should look for a plant called mugwort grass. Tia had described it, saying it would keep Maadu from getting any more children, but Elan never saw anything like it. Now only the effron would make it easier, and what was there to heal her afterward?

This section of the passageway was dark. There were several glowfish, but they must have been getting old because Elan could scarcely see. When she came to the opening, she knew why. The day was gloomy. Usually it was a pleasant sensation to come from the passageways into the sunlight, but today the clouds hid the sun.

As she swam, Elan tried to formulate a plan. She would have to go to Tia or to get word to her somehow. For a moment, she had the fearful thought that Thon, knowing Elan might try another "Merra plot," would try to get to Tia. What if he was hiding, waiting for her to go there?

Below her, in the Center Place, Elan saw a small crowd collecting. She swam nearer, wondering if it was an announcement concerning the Choosing. The thought made her stomach clench.

On her way to join the crowd, she passed Mogs, and Merramogs, and occasionally other Merra, maids and males. They rarely even raised their heads, knowing it safer to avoid eye contact, which could set off some belligerent Mog.

Elan longed to share her newfound knowledge of cross-

speaking, for it must be that the Merras once used it commonly. Why else would it have been obliterated so completely? But there was no time now.

When she reached the perimeter of the crowd, she heard several maids talking about the Choosing. It was all anyone talked about. Each time Elan thought someone else would be Between—and that it could never be her—she burned with a physical pain. She looked over the crowd to see which of the maids had the biggest stars in her eyes. She recognized some of them, Nal-we of the Ondort family, and her sisters Ursa and Duana. Why bother with the competition, Elan thought bitterly. They could just as easily hand the title to one of those maids. There was little else they didn't have.

Elan knew she must put her own woes aside and concentrate on how she was going to get to Tia. She was about to turn away from this crowd when she spotted a Nemu among them. She swam higher to get a better look at him, because if this Nemu was the one she hoped for, her first problem was solved.

She saw the bluish cast about his head and, when a maid drifted slightly, was able to see his side. It was him. He was marked by a crescent moon, to identify him as companion and to keep him from being hunted by any overzealous Ghrismogs. It was Tia's Nemu, and if Elan could get to him, he could get a message to Tia.

Elan moved slowly through the crowd, wondering if Tia had sent her Nemu for news of the Choosing. She was careful to dull her colors and to look without purpose as she glanced occasionally at the speaker.

"Any may compete, but she does so at her own risk," the Mog was saying. "And by final decree of the Elders, all elements of the Choosing are to remain unchanged." A rumble passed through the crowd; this last announcement had made them angry. Elan knew nothing about the Choosing, but she used the distraction of the crowd to work her way next to the Nemu. She looked closely at him. There was nothing to read in his inscrutable gray eyes. Elan made her face look empty and used her fingers to comb the tangles from her hair. She was just a Merras being vain, no one would suspect. Still, she could feel her heart racing. She was going to cross-speak with a Nemu while they were completely surrounded by others. <Can the Nemu take Tia to the outer caves? I must speak

with her.> Elan didn't look at him as she cross-spoke, but she felt his jolt of surprise. When she glanced at him, she saw the Nemu studying her carefully, saw the vague look of recognition. Elan continued combing her hair with an absentminded slowness. She was equally thrilled and frightened by what was happening.

<Nemu try can,> he answered. <The yellow cave?> Elan was impressed by his control. She knew how passionate the dolphins were about their freedom and the open sea, and she wondered what special bargain there might be between the Nemu and the Merra that could make the dolphin forfeit what was most precious. Elan knew of perhaps only one or two other Nemu companions in the confines of the Caverns.

<Yes, the yellow cave,> Elan answered. There were ruined Merra caves, brightly colored chambers thought to be where the coral painters practiced their art. No one went there. Ghrismogs thought Merra caves were haunted. <I will go there at once, and wait for you; it is very important.> She risked another glance at the Nemu as they cross-spoke.

<Nemu try can,> he repeated, never taking his eyes from the announcer. Elan saw that a few of the maids in the crowd were beginning to notice her. Everyone knew that Merras did not compete in the Choosing, so her presence was arousing suspicion. She gave a flip to her hair and hoped she looked uninterested, then quietly swam away.

Her stomach fluttered as she approached the outer caves. It was an ancient Merra city, now fallen to ruin. She rarely had a chance to see it, but each time she did she had an odd sensation of belonging. She felt much more at home in the crumbling rooms than in the gray caves she had grown up in. Tia had told her that winters before, the yellow cave had been the meeting place for the Merra who were yet living in the Caverns, before they were forbidden to meet.

Elan felt hurt that Tia had never told her about cross-speaking. In Tia's small living space, everything they said could be heard. Perhaps she thought it too dangerous to discuss.

Elan let herself float to the surface to get a better view of Tia's approach. What would she do if they didn't come? The sun had partially broken through the clouds,

and Elan could feel its warmth on her back. She used her cross-speaking voice to beckon to a school of passing fish. They were a brilliant yellow and surrounded her curiously. Elan let them play in her hair.

After what seemed a long time, something caught her attention coming from the open sea. Tia rode the Nemu just as Elan had, but Tia's Nemu swam much more slowly because Tia was frail. They had circled the long way to be certain no one followed. Elan swam down from the surface toward them and cross-spoke her greeting.

<Thank you for coming, Tia—Nemu.> Elan was not certain that cross-speaking between Merras was possible, but when she saw the way Tia's face shone, she knew it must be. Not only that, it must be clearer as well. Elan had sometimes noticed that Tia had difficulty telling from which direction a voice was coming, but with cross-speaking, Tia looked directly at the young Merra, her expression surprised.

<It is odd that you know cross-speaking without training, very odd—but no matter—how long has it been since I've heard that joyous sound from another Merra?> she asked. <Let us go inside in case anyone comes.>

Elan led her inside the yellow cave while the Nemu swam outside to guard their privacy. The two Merras floated in the center of the room, the light streaming down in shafts from the sky holes overhead. Tia, too happy to speak, placed her fingers upon Elan's cheek to feel her smile. Elan quickly untied the luti shell from her hair and placed it in Tia's hand. Tia was startled by the memories the luti shell brought back to her, and Elan was not surprised to see her place the shell to her lips without blowing.

"How did you learn this was special?" Tia asked.

"It was given to me, by the Nemu," Elan answered.

Tia's eyes widened. "It was given? Then it is very special." She felt the luti with both her hands and seemed melancholy. "There are few left who know the significance of this gift, so I should tell you what I know of it." Elan sensed Tia's awe at the luti, but she also felt an element of warning in Tia's voice. "The Nemu can be called by the luti. If they can hear it, they will come without fail, faster than it takes for you to shape your need in words. But only the most dire, unsolvable problem is excuse enough. It is a token of a sacred trust

between the Merra and Nemu, and therefore the shell must never be used frivolously or carelessly. Mothers passed their own luti to their Merra children without ever having used it, and with it came the responsibility. The trust has never been broken, which is why the Nemu remain loyal."

"Why weren't the Nemu called to help the Merra against the Ghrismogs?" Elan asked.

"That came as gradually as a river of sand. There was no single enemy," Tia answered. As she spoke, she felt inside a small basket at her waist. Her hand ran over the fine weaving tools she kept inside.

"I rode a Nemu, we flew over the waves, and I met a Squid."

"A Squid?" Tia reacted. "You cross-spoke with a Squid?"

"It was huge, Tia, it nearly devoured me, but something happened. The creature said I sang a song. He called it the danger song. Then he explained cross-speaking, and insisted I try it," Elan went on excitedly.

Tia cut away some of her own long silver strands of hair. "Here, hold this end." She placed the ends of the long strands in Elan's hands. "Even as a young maid, I only remember a few Merra who have had the good fortune to cross-speak with a Squid. The old ones are very wise, and if this one was as big as you say, he may be as old as a Seadragon."

"A Seadragon?" Though Elan didn't know how old that would be, she knew it was very old. She still had so many questions she ached to ask, but the purpose of this meeting was Maadu, and Elan had to find more effron. Her questions would have to wait.

Tia seemed to sense the somber change in Elan. "You said you needed to talk with me about something urgent?" she asked, though her hands never stopped working. Tia's weaving was renowned, and with strands nearly too fine to see, she was weaving a small webbed purse, no bigger than the luti shell. The pattern was as delicate as a sea fan, and Tia's silver hair shone in the sun from above. Elan was fascinated by Tia's art and watched closely.

"Maadu is having trouble with the baby, and I need effron. I found some with the help of the Squid, but I have no time to go there again. Do you know where I

can find any? I'm afraid Maadu needs it badly." Elan told her briefly about how Thon had caught her and thrown away the healing plant.

"It may be too late for the effron, even if you find some way to get it to her. You know they will be watching you more closely than ever," Tia said. "I have none. It has become too dangerous to keep it in my cave. Many were beginning to come to me instead of the healers, and guards came to my cave with threats."

Elan watched as Tia put the finishing touches to the web. She was now braiding a fine silver chain, feeling it with her fingers for evenness. By the way she tugged and yanked, Elan knew it was as strong as any grass rope.

"I think I remember where some grows," Tia went on. "I will send the Nemu for it. It is far away; he cannot be back until tomorrow. Will the baby wait?"

"I don't know." Elan knew there was nothing to do but wait. If Tia had to go so far for it, there was not likely to be any nearer.

"The Nemu can meet you here tomorrow. He can be here late morning, I think, if there is no trouble."

Elan watched as the woven chain neared completion, and since all there was now was to wait until she met with the Nemu, she longed to ask her questions. Did Tia know about the songs? About the voices that came to her in the night?

Tia looked suddenly melancholy. "I thought somehow I was protecting you by not telling you about cross-speaking, or more about the Merrra. To know what once was, and to see what has become of us, is painful. Perhaps not as painful as your loneliness. I know now I was wrong. When I heard you cross-speaking, many winters disappeared, and I felt the kind memory of the closeness to another being. It made me forget for a moment how changed we are—forgive me. I gave up hope for myself, and that is without courage, but I had no right to give up for you as well." Tia squared her shoulders.

"When Maadu is well, we can meet here again, and talk," Elan assured her. "We have time."

Tia smiled and put her weaving tools away. She took the luti from her basket and placed it in the hollow of the delicate webbing. The unfinished strands she used to completely encase the shell, and with the woven chains coming from each end, she took it and reached out for

Elan to fasten it around her waist. The shell was no bigger than Elan's thumb, and it fit snugly against the skin of her stomach. Tia tied both ends of the chain in a permanent knot at the small of the young Merra's back.

"This is how they were once worn. You can see that to use the luti, the webbing must be torn. This is to remind you how grave your circumstances must be."

Elan placed her hand over the shell. <Thank you Tia,> she said, and they hugged one another.

Tia kept her thoughts to herself, but she had never heard of anyone who was able to cross-speak without long moons of practice. Well, she thought, many things had changed. She gestured that they should leave.

"We will send the Nemu on his way as quickly as possible. He has far to travel," Tia said as Elan led her from the yellow cave. The Nemu knew they would come, for he was waiting just outside. As Tia grasped the dorsal of her Nemu, Elan stole a glance at the dolphin. There was a noble grace about him. She wondered again at his dedication. She felt warmed when she saw him recognize the luti at her waist. He seemed to regard her with more interest.

"We will talk again. After Maadu is well, you can find the Nemu in the Center Place, or you can cross-speak directly to me," Tia said. She couldn't see Elan's amazement.

"Across the Center Place, you can hear me?" Elan asked.

"Across the sea, child. The best were able to send their voices anywhere." Tia smiled sadly. "Perhaps there are none left who can do it now, but you try it. I may hear you."

Elan watched the Nemu and Tia swim away and thought how beautiful Tia looked. Her silver hair was all that told of her winters passed. Elan knew she had not been born blind, and she hoped someday Tia would tell her how it had happened.

Elan swam in the opposite direction, over the deserted city of the Merra. She was glad she and Tia would meet there. Elan glimpsed colored rooms and wonderful shapes, fallen into ruin, and resolved to come back soon to explore. Ghosts were better companions than Ghrismogs.

Elan arched into a broad backward half-circle through the water and looked up at the sky above the surface. The angle of the sun told her she had but half the day to

look for the sea pear. She shot down to the bottom again and began crisscrossing the outer reefs beyond the Merra caves, searching for the right tree. She approached each one with hope, but swam away from many, disappointed. Maadu had eaten little for days, and she would need all the strength she could gather for the birth.

In the distance, Elan spotted a strange rock formation. Though it was clustered with various boulders and outcroppings, its shape was that of a colossal overturned clamshell, the peak of its back arched over the waves. She was drawn to it, and was glad to find vegetation growing around it. It was an extended ridge of the third reef that circled the Caverns, in line with the Merra caves.

Few came this way. Not only were the Merra caves daunting to some, but the third reef was getting too close to the open sea for the Cavern-bred.

Elan had just reached the strange rock formation when she heard voices. She looked hurriedly for a place to hide, spotting a low cave mouth nearly hidden by a dense clump of sea fans. She pushed the fans aside and slipped into the cave behind them. The voices grew louder, and for a moment she feared they would swim directly over her.

They were Mog netters, three of them, returning to the Caverns from the open sea. By the size of the basket they carried, Elan knew it had been a short trip. Two carried the woven net, laden with fish, and the third watched the sea around them to be certain the trail of fish blood left in their wake did not draw unwelcome predators.

Elan hoped they would continue past her, but suddenly the watching netter barked out, "Barracuda!" Since barracudas were sometimes a more aggressive fish than sharks, the netters would have to face off and protect their catch. They would be there until the barracudas attacked or gave up their quarry. With a start, Elan realized she had slipped into the cave mouth without checking for eels. She studied the hiding place for the first time. It looked like an ordinary cave, black rocks sprouting bits of plant life and clinging abalone. There was not even a whisper of danger within, no trace of any predator whose home might be in the hidden crevice. On

the contrary, something about it made her feel safe. There was a fluttering in her stomach, a thrill of expectation.

She turned to peer into the darkness behind her. Strangely enough, the passageway was dimly lit. She decided to follow the crevice back to where it led. Though the passage was narrow, Elan never felt uncomfortable or trapped, for there was always the light just ahead. No Ghrismog she had ever met could make it through the tight turns and squeezes between slabs of rock.

The passages went on and on, and instead of growing darker, they became more light. The light came from a source she could not locate, unless it was from the emerald-colored algae itself, which grew like velvet along the rock walls. Every time she thought to turn back, certain the netters had passed, a new thrill passed through her, eclipsing her worry.

A smell on the current filled her head with strange and exotic sensations. The farther back she followed the passage, the stronger the spice smells became, luring her on. Finally the crevice opened onto a small chamber, which was dark except for a narrow beam of light coming from a hole in the stone arch above it. An opaque shaft cut through the room as if it were something solid. It fell upon only one place on the opposite side of the chamber, where a cluster of delicate crystalline spires grew out from the rock, within the illuminated circle. The light caught in the crystals and scattered into thousands of dancing points of brilliance around the chamber, shifting with the same lazy pulse as the surge.

Elan was certain this cave had led her to a discovery far from the ordinary. Bursting with expectation, she swam up to the small hole in the ceiling. It was too small for her to squeeze through, so she pulled away some of the growth around the hole. The spice smells still beckoned, and the light coming from whatever lay beyond was brilliant. Elan tried reaching an arm through, again fearing there could be eels, yet certain there were none. If she tucked her other shoulder beneath her chin and kept that arm pressed closely to her, she could almost make it through. With her eyes this close to the hole, she could see small spaces of nearly polished rock. Long before, this passage must have been devoid of growth. But in ensuing winters, barnacles and limpets and mossy plants had narrowed the opening by several fingers. Elan was

determined to see what lay beyond, for it seemed to call her fiercely. She compressed her broad shoulders as tightly as she could and gave a vicious whip of her tail. Her arms scraped against the barnacles as the small obstacles gave way, and she burst into the next room.

Elan was blinded by the dazzling light. What surrounded her was not of a world she knew. It was lush, and alive and overwhelming. From her throat came a cry that startled her, piercing and triumphant. It floated out into this ancient place, to be swallowed by spirits long dead.

With her arms outstretched, Elan rotated slowly to see everything around her. What struck her first was the immensity of this place. It was some sort of forgotten garden, overgrown with lush plants and trees and coral arches, all of varieties completely unknown to her. She could not see the boundaries of the cavern because of the dense vegetation, but she judged it to be at least twice the size of the Elders' chambers. The water was only thirty or forty tails deep, and there was bright sunlight coming from somewhere. She swam to the surface and brought her head and shoulders into the warm dry air. A high domed ceiling arched over her, what had looked like the humped back of a clam from outside. It was of solid stone, but for a thin slice of bright sky that shone through an opening shaped like a new moon. She turned slowly again, her hair floating around her shoulders, and saw that the walls of the cavern were covered with drawings. She could not make them out because they were so far away. Below the walls, spilling into the water, were narrow strips of white sand beaches scattered with large and strange shells. Their shapes had been altered, so they looked more like tools to Elan. This place must have been important to the Merrra. It felt sacred in a way that made Elan tingle with anticipated discoveries. She swam down again to look through the garden. Somewhere in this tangle there had to be effron, but one plant grew into another, the larger plants obscuring smaller ones beneath. She hunted through one section without luck.

She swam the length of the vast cavern to see if she recognized any of the vegetation. Without doubt these were the plants the Squid spoke of, the ones that had been lost to the rest of the sea. Almost all were unfamiliar. There were multicolored fans, each a delicate lacy pattern. Corals grew in fantastic spirals; others folded

into convoluted mounds. Long pearly stems stuck straight up from the bottom nearly as tall as Elan, each crowned with great feathered arcs of pastel tendrils. These waved gently on the faint current, and Elan touched one gently to see it disappear inside its stem.

She swam about quickly, but saw nothing that looked like effron. Near her, through coral that had been fashioned into arches, she saw what looked like fruit-bearing trees. Even from this distance, Elan recognized the pear trees, each laden with fruit. She swam toward them, marveling at the abundance of this treasure, and found herself surrounded by exotic trees offering strange delicacies. Small round fruits, brilliantly red, long shiny green pods, spiked oval orbs—all of it swaying rhythmically. The vegetation seemed to be bursting with uncontrolled life, long neglected. One of the corals she recognized grew less than the thickness of her finger in a hundred winters. She looked at the spires of this coral reaching to the surface of the water.

This Merra hold was ancient, perhaps of the same time as the crumbled ruins of the Merra city. But this was haunting in a way the ruins were not. The garden was alive with evidence of the past. It taunted her with what might have been, let her see too painfully that the world she was accustomed to was devoid of all things beautiful. Life in the sea before Ghrismogs must have been enchanting; it was clear why the Merra were consumed by their hunger for this magnificence.

Each detail of the garden—even the most insignificant moss or fan—was a glorious example of a loving hand. The presence of the lost Merras was as fresh as new grief in this hold of living treasures. What had happened to those who had planted this garden?

Elan was startled from her musings by a sudden darkness. Had a cloud passed the sun, or was the sun setting? She looked up to see the moon slit of sky darkening, and knew she had lost track of time. She picked one pear and tied it in her hair, then went back to the section of the garden where the strangest plants grew.

She crisscrossed, pulling aside the larger plants to see beneath them, looking for the effron. It had to be here, and several times she thought she saw it, but it was always some other plant, red with yellow stripes, or red with hollow ridges. It was getting difficult to discern

color. Elan had lost her race with the darkness, and if she didn't leave now, Maadu wouldn't even have the pear she needed for strength. Elan didn't dare take more than one, or any of the other fruits, for doing so would arouse suspicion.

As she swam for the entrance hole, she thought happily that the mugwort grass of which Tia spoke had to be somewhere in the garden. Maadu could take it to keep from getting another child.

Elan reached the hole and pulled away some of the growth she had loosened. She already felt the stinging in her arms, and she would have to think of a story to explain the marks. She was certain it was her imagination, but it seemed that the scar that circled her shoulder was burning.

She glanced behind her one last time, battling a tremendous feeling of loss at leaving this place, which burst with knowledge of her past. She would have to keep the secret well, for if the Ghrismogs learned of the garden, they would destroy it. Elan folded her arms and shoulders as tightly as she could and slowly worked her way into the opening. Once her shoulders were through, she flicked her tail once, and out she drifted. The next chamber, the one with the crystalline spires, was less magical in the darkness, but she had yet enough light to see by and swam into the passageway.

With a wistful farewell, she swam back through the winding crevices as quickly as possible. Though it was growing darker outside, the strange luminescence lit her way, and the soft green mosses cushioned the hard rock walls. If Tia's Nemu was not able to find the healing plant, Elan would have time the following morning to hunt again for the effron. In any case, she knew she must tell him of the garden. It was frightening to be the solitary link to the Merra legacy that had lain hidden for so many centuries. If anything should happen to her, who knew how long it might be lost?

With her face pressed against the back of the sea fans, Elan peered out into the sea beyond, gloomy with dusk. She listened carefully for voices, and when she was certain she was alone, she swam out. Though there was little chance that Mogs would be in this part of the sea, especially at night, she would take no chances. She shot away from the entrance and looked around her to memorize

the exact location. She would have no trouble finding it again, for the garden seemed as much a part of her as her dreams.

Elan felt the gentle tug of the luti at her waist. She placed her hand over it and thought about how much her life had changed in the past two days. The shell had brought her luck. Now she only needed one more thing. Maadu's baby had to wait until Elan could get back with the effron. Just one more day.

6

The Last Gift



Elan was glad she had made the trip from the Center Place to Thon and Maadu's cave so many times. Its convoluted turns were confusing. The few Ghrismogs who were still about at the late hour looked at her with suspicion, but Elan kept her eyes downcast and swam as quickly as was safe.

Outside their cave, she untied the pear from her hair and carried it visibly, should Thon be ready to strike her again. She would tell him this was the soonest she could get back, for she had had to go far to find it.

Her euphoria about finding the ancient garden was dulled by her fear for Maadu. Elan braced herself for the confrontation and moved aside the entrance net.

Once inside, Elan was surprised to see no one there. Her stomach churned with sudden panic. Had something terrible happened? She felt more calm when she saw Maadu was still in her sleepnet. For a moment, she wondered if this might be a trap—Thon allowing her to think she was alone so that if she tried to give Maadu anything, he could catch her.

Elan swam to her mother's side and felt relieved when Maadu's eyes opened and warmed with recognition.

"You're looking better." Elan handed the pear through the sleepnet.

Maadu took it, smiling. "This is the most beautiful pear you have ever found me."

Elan felt another pang of guilt when she realized she was grateful Maadu had not asked where she had found the fruit. Would she have lied to Maadu? "Where is everyone?" Elan looked around the empty cave.

"I sent them away," Maadu said.

"You what?"

"I sent them away—for the first time ever. I was having pains and they wanted to send for the healer. I said don't send for him yet. I wanted to live through the night and I would not if they called that fraud. It started them all bickering and they were making so much noise I told them to leave me. And can you believe it? They did. Thon took them all to his mother's." Maadu was obviously anxious to share this small triumph, though talking tired her. Elan wished more than ever that she had found the effron in the garden. She gestured to the pear and Maadu remembered to eat it. Her eyes widened with pleasure.

"The sweetest I have ever tasted, daughter." Maadu reached through the webbing and stroked Elan's hair, but the maid was frightened by the expression on her mother's face. It said, "Who will love you when I'm gone?" and Elan fought against her fear.

"I can bring you more, after the baby comes. I wasn't able to find the—other yet. Tomorrow. Does it feel ready to come? What sort of pains are they?" Elan knew nothing of Mog young or of deliveries. Thon had made her leave the cave when Tsui was born. He said Elan might curse Maadu. Maadu had been too weak to cross him. Elan saw that Maadu struggled with her answer, her nature not allowing her to complain.

"I think it's turned around, tail down," she whispered fearfully. Elan's heart tightened. There were few who did not know the dangers of tail-down births. Scales were loose on the edge nearest the tail, and the scales caught like hooks in the birth passage, making it difficult or impossible for the baby to pass through.

Sometimes the baby turned around by itself, but if that did not happen, the Mog healers would reach into the womb and hook a noose around the baby's head, attempting to pull it around. Usually the baby became stuck crosswise and there was nothing to do but to yank at the noose, automatically killing the child, and often the mother as well. Elan shuddered, and hoped that the baby would turn itself.

"Do you think it will wait?" Elan whispered, feeling utterly helpless. She placed her hands over her mother's swollen belly, and Maadu's eyes twinkled.

"I'll tie a knot in my tail," she teased. It was an old Mog joke. Mogs tended toward dark humor. They were laughing when the others came back, so they quickly quieted their mood.

The moment Tsui was inside the entrance net she swam to Maadu's side, pushing herself between Elan and Maadu. She saw the pear and glared angrily at Elan for finding another. Elan swam to the other side of the cave and made herself busy preparing the evening meal.

"You should hear it out there, Mother. All anyone is talking about is the Choosing. We saw two maids who will compete. Mother, can I try? I want to be Between—then everyone will have to do what I say." Tsui looked directly at Elan.

"I know you would like to, dear, but I'm afraid you are too young," Maadu answered patiently.

"But at the next Choosing, I'll be too old," Tsui whined. "It isn't fair. I'm big enough. Mara doesn't want to be Between because she's afraid, but I want to—" Tsui looked at Elan again and smiled. "At least Elan can't be Between. She's too stupid and they won't let her." Elan's anger rose, even as Maadu gently scolded Tsui.

"That's not nice, Tsui. Elan isn't stupid. She's your sister."

Tsui didn't like being reprimanded, and swam to her oldest brother. "I could be Between, couldn't I?" She was annoying, and her brother was in no mood.

"Don't be silly. Those killer whales would get one look at you and they wouldn't even bother to eat you. One shrimp is hardly worth the effort," he said. Tsui struck at him, and he raced off, Tsui screaming after him. The disturbance troubled Maadu, and finally Thon yelled at them to quit. Tsui still pouted as she returned to Maadu's sleepnet.

Elan had finished preparing a meal of mollusks and sea cucumbers. Mara joined her to help dish it into serving shells. Elan took her shell of cucumbers spiced with a hot herb gathered by the deep fishers and left Mara to serve the food to the others.

Elan started for her own room to eat in privacy as she often did. As she passed by her mother she secretly brushed by her hand and heard Maadu whisper, "Good night."

Elan slipped inside her sleepnet and ate her meal with little interest. She wished she had taken the time to sample some of what she saw in the garden. It was hard for her to believe such a place existed, could have survived all these centuries unattended. She couldn't wait to go back.

She was curious at all that had happened to her in a short time. Could it be true that vast plans were laid out within the Balance? Even the Squid had said he would not tell her where the songs had come from until he understood why the Balance had brought a Merra to him. Elan felt as if she had gotten caught in some underwater current that was whisking her toward an unknown future.

Her thoughts turned to what her foster brother had said about the Choosing. He had mentioned killer whales. What did killer whales have to do with the future Between? Why did everyone else seem to know the details of the Choosing when she knew nothing? Next time she saw Tia, Elan would ask her about the whales. She had never thought about the actual tests of the Choosing; to her it was merely an abstract obstacle one had to pass to come near the Seadragons. What would it feel like to actually be near one that was alive and not a replica on a wall? She had imagined the thrill of seeing the glistening scales moving with the pulse of their breath, and she had seen in her mind their ancient eyes, wise with all the secrets of life.

What exactly did a Between do for the Seadragons? Would the pictures in the garden give her any clues?

The excitement of her day and the pervasive worries over Maadu had exhausted Elan more than she knew. As sleep dulled her awareness, she let her mind drift back to the garden. Somewhere in it was the effron and Maadu's health.

In that dreamy place between waking and sleeping, Elan heard her distant voices. For some reason they were clearer, more real and haunting.

Elan was startled from her sleep. She floated a moment, wondering what sound there had been in the quietness that was wrong. There it came, the faintest cry of pain. It was Maadu.

Elan rushed into the main cave to find Maadu thrashing, her bunched fists pulling at the sleepnet around her.

"I'm here, Maadu, I'm here." Elan kept her voice calm as she reached into the sleepnet and automatically began massaging her mother's abdomen.

"I'm sorry," Maadu managed between labored breaths, "I didn't mean to wake you—it's coming, I think." Elan kept up her kneading, and began making a calming cooing noise. The sounds helped hold back her feelings of betrayal. She had been so certain the baby would wait. Because of all the wondrous things that had happened to her, the garden and the Nemu and Squid, Elan thought that everything had changed. But it would not be so. The baby would come tonight, and she would have no chance to help Maadu with the effron. Elan fought for control as Maadu cried out again and writhed in pain. She pressed one hand against Maadu's back and massaged with the other, and her mother relaxed slightly. Elan was heart-sick as she saw Tsui enter the main cave, her eyes puffy.

It was less her mother's distress than seeing Elan touching her that started Tsui wailing. Elan could not shut her up, and Maadu was too weak to control her. Shortly, the others drifted in one by one, all stupid with sleep.

"Is it your time?" Thon asked gruffly.

"I don't know," Maadu answered, her voice a labored whisper. She tried to keep her tone even so Thon would think it was not yet time to send for the healer. Elan knew then that Maadu trusted her more than she did the Mog healer. Thon grunted and Elan could feel him watching her. She sensed his indecision and growing panic. Even Thon was not unaware of the bad reputation of the healers, but for Thon, there was no other alternative.

"Go and get him," he said to his son.

"No!" both Elan and Maadu cried out simultaneously.

"Get the healer!" Thon roared at his eldest son, who sprinted out of the cave. Maadu and Elan exchanged a look of dread. Elan calmed her own fears and continued massaging Maadu, who was stiffening again. It was time for the baby. Beneath her hands Elan could feel the head. The child was a tail-down, and Elan desperately wished she knew what to do. She massaged and kneaded,

she spoke in relaxing tones. The others did not interfere. The moments passed. Maadu remained pale and drawn as Elan worked instinctively. Suddenly she felt the baby move, felt it thrusting its head in the direction she was pushing it. Maadu's eyes sprang open; she had felt it too. They looked at each other hopefully. A song came to Elan from nowhere, and though she was frightened by what Thon would do, she sang it just louder than her breath. It was a rhythmic song, taking Maadu's breathing with it, keeping it slow and more relaxed. If Thon or the others heard, they were too distracted watching for the Mog healer to notice.

Elan began to feel they might win, that they might make the baby right before the healer could get there. She and Maadu felt a mutual relief, though fragile, which was suddenly shattered by Thon's bark of recognition. Maadu was instantly tense again, and she reached for Elan's hand. It was the first time Elan could ever remember seeing Maadu look frightened. Elan ached with her helplessness and fear.

The healer came blustering in, self-important, and sour at having been awakened. When he set down his tools, he saw Elan near Maadu and grew rigid with anger.

"Get her out of here," he ordered.

"I want her to stay," Maadu answered weakly.

"Then I am not going to help you," the Mog threatened, and he picked up his bag for emphasis.

"Let him go," Maadu tried again, but Thon cut her off.

"Wait." Thon turned to look at his wife. Elan could see the doubt in him. He loved Maadu above all else, but Elan did not know if her silence or pleading would tip his wavering. The Mog healer filled the momentary silence, aiming his venom directly at Elan.

"I am a trained healer, sick to see a Merra among your household," he said, sneering. Elan watched Thon closely and knew his decision before he spoke.

"Get out," he commanded her, his face stony to hide the doubt. The Mog healer hovered near the entrance, looking satisfied. Elan couldn't move. "I said get out!" Thon repeated.

"Thon, everyone knows that to call these Mog healers is the cruelest of mockeries. He will give her death and

you will give him pearls for his trouble." Elan kept her voice low and controlled. The tension was thick in the room, but she knew Maadu would have made this argument had she had the strength. "Please, Thon, ask Maadu, don't let him have her." She pointed to the healer whose eyes bulged with his anger.

"To allow a Merra to speak so? To me!" The Mog healer spoke in a voice that was a barely controlled scream. Elan watched as Thon struggled, and she knew the moment she had lost.

"Get out now." The burden of his decision broke him, and he ordered her from the main cave to her room. Maadu whispered to Elan that she would be all right, but the young Merra read the fear in her mother's face. Elan was powerless to change what was happening. She dropped her eyes to the sandy floor and looked up only as she passed Maadu. Their fingers touched, and Maadu tried to smile.

Inside the darkness of her room, Elan swam into the confines of her sleepnet and bunched the webbing in her hands. She tried to hear, but it was only mumbling. Long periods of silence were shattered by screams from Maadu.

The night crept along, measured out in the ebb and flow of her mother's cries. She felt pierced by each of them, knowing she could have helped Maadu better. She had been helping before the healer came; somehow whatever it was they had been doing was right.

Now, no matter what she did, they would not let her near her mother. Even if she forced her way in again, Maadu's waning strength would be spent protecting Elan from Thon and the healer.

The murmuring of the voices grew more steady as Maadu's cries became less frequent. What were they saying? Why couldn't she hear her mother? Sometime later there was one long cry. It was weak. Elan felt her throat tighten, and she held herself and rocked.

The silence in the main cave was broken by the healer's voice in apologetic, defensive tones. A wave of sorrow filled Elan and left room for nothing else. There would be no sound of a baby crying, no twinkle in kind brown eyes. In Elan were the echoes of the cry, of what she knew had been Maadu's farewell to her. Elan whispered good-bye to her mother's gentle spirit.

In the main cave were the sounds of the healer leaving, closely followed by the angry crying of Tsui.

"Elan killed her, it was Elan's fault," Tsui wailed.

Thon silenced Tsui. "Elan didn't kill her. Take her to her sleepnet, Mara," he said quietly. Elan recognized the sorrow in his voice, but she was too numb to appreciate his defense of her. She heard Mara pass her room, trying to calm Tsui, then the boys going to their rooms. They all talked quietly for some time, and Elan was still listening much later when they dropped off to sleep.

She knew that before the night was gone, Thon would take Maadu's body and wrap it in the sleepnet Elan had woven for her. He would swim with her one last time, far out to sea, and leave her tied to some distant coral reef.

Elan waited until she knew Thon had left with Maadu's body, then slipped from her sleepnet. She unhooked it, rolled it in her arms, and swam into the main cave.

By the faint light of the caged glowfish, Elan scanned their cave. Storage bins, serving shells, hunting nets secured to the far wall—nothing spoke of Maadu's ever having lived there. It was gray and sparse. The only evidence of Maadu and her kindness, Elan carried inside her. Maadu's love had enveloped her and kept her from drifting with the same certainty as a sleepnet at night. The memory of that security remained, unobscured by the void of Maadu's absence.

Elan swam to the wall hook and took the knife she had made. She wondered if it was his grief that had caused Thon to forget it. I will need it more than Thon, she thought as she tied it to her waist.

She was leaving. The decision was not momentous. It was as if she had always known. Had Maadu's dying been in the Balance as well? Elan pulled aside the entrance net and left with ease the cave that had been her home. It had been her mother's last unknowing gift to her, the freedom to go.

Even with the moonlight, Elan had a difficult time finding the Merra caves. It was nearly light by the time she got there, exhausted. She followed one of the chambers back from the yellow cave and found another smaller room. It was darker here, protected. After securing her

sleepnet to several rocks, she wrapped it around herself. Though she was near the open sea and knew many of the most fearsome predators hunted at night, she felt safe. Her fatigue gave way quickly to sleep, and with it came the voices. They were comforting, and accompanied her dreams of Seadragons and of Maadu.

When she opened her eyes the following morning, she thought she had heard Maadu calling her name. She found herself completely surrounded by an iridescent green, the same green the coral painters had used to depict the scales of the Seadragons.

"No wonder I dreamed about the Seadragons," Elan said out loud to herself. Then she heard the cross-spoken calling of her name. Elan remembered. It must be Tia's Nemu, already back from his journey for the effron.

Elan hurriedly swam from her sleepnet and met the Nemu outside the yellow cave. She saw he had indeed found the effron, and she took it from his mouth to hide in his carrying pouch. She would not need it. Elan delivered her sorrowful news, but she was no less grateful for his kind gesture. The Nemu said nothing, but Elan felt less burdened by her grief because she saw he truly listened, and even in his reserve, there was a measure of tenderness.

Elan asked that he follow her. Sometime during her night journey to the Merrra ruins, she had decided she would spend her mourning period in the garden. She didn't know how long she would stay. Perhaps she would find the Squid again. Tia had said there was much one could learn from ancient creatures.

Together Elan and the Nemu watched to be certain no one saw them. She wanted the dolphin to accompany her to the garden, and though there was no chance of his passing through the narrow entrance, he would be able to identify the location to Tia. As they swam, Elan did her best to describe what she had seen inside. She told the dolphin that as soon as she was able she would come to Tia and take her to the garden herself.

It did not take them long to reach the entrance. The Nemu noted his surroundings carefully. Elan thought again how noble he was, and she wished she had a friend such as he.

<This Nemu for your loss sorry is,> he said. Elan made

the gesture of respect and quickly disappeared through the sea fans. She turned and paused a moment to watch the Nemu start back for the Center Place, but soon the garden beckoned her, and she made her way into the darkness.

This time here would be good for her. She could feel the tremors in the old memories. The garden would heal her and fill her with new strengths. If she was lucky, the mysteries would keep her busy enough for the next two moons to forget that there would be a Choosing—a Choosing and a new Between. She swallowed back her bitterness for the hundredth time. She had the garden now. If another maid had the honor of being companion to the Seadragons, Elan would have to make do with her dreams.

7

The Balance



Menol swam through the Grand Chamber flanked by two robust netters. The first time he had met netters, he thought the entire breed was surly and difficult. He had since come to respect them. They had a natural reserve, a thick-necked dignity.

"You sure got the maids after you," the younger netter remarked, noticing that many of the Mogmaids stopped what they were doing to watch Menol pass. He had few of the characteristics common to Ghrismogs. Though he was powerfully built, he did not have the exaggerated barrel chest or as much hair. Menol was surprised to hear the tone of envy in the young netter's voice, for the benefits of having maids find you attractive was a small compensation for the handicap that came with looking Merra. He glanced at the two thick-bodied netters. All they had in common with him was their coloration. Menol's hair was black, and his eyes and tail gray green. These were thought to be acceptable Mog colors.

"Yeah, let him try the open sea for a while, get him scarred up like us, then see if the maids chase him," the older one said, and they all laughed. Their laughter was a pleasant sound; it made Menol aware of how little he heard it. Most of the Ghrismogs he dealt with were politically powerful, and he couldn't hear them laugh without sensing something malicious in it. The netters were different. They spent much of their time alone in the open sea, where dangers constantly tested them. It made them wily and smart. They had only each other to depend on. Generation after generation of them lived "outside," maintaining little contact with the caves. It

suited them, Menol thought, and he found them refreshing company.

There was no time for admiration, however. Menol had collected reports from netters in every reach. There were odd rumors and distant rumblings of panic. Menol had to put an end to it; whether there was any basis for their apprehension didn't matter. There was a Choosing to organize.

"I may have to try netting if you and the other netters can't do what you have been hired to do." They stiffened in response. At last they reached Menol's chambers in the Grand Chamber, and he led them in so they could have a private meeting. As Menol faced them he noted how uncomfortable they were in the enclosed space, without the large nets they so often carried over their arms.

"So what is the problem?" Menol directed his question to the older Mog.

"Sabat, it's like we told the High Elder, the killers—the killer whales, that is—we're afraid they're going to be a bigger problem than you think."

Menol saw the other netter nod in agreement. "You need only herd us two killer whales," he said. "I want to know the difficulties."

"Sabat." The old Mog's voice was strained. "There's not been one long trip we've undertaken where at least one Mog hasn't been killed. That's never happened before, and we're thinking something's not right with the sea. We're not just being attacked, we're being stalked! They're hunting us! I don't know if you know about killers, but usually they swim together, they're friendly to each other. Except when they're breeding or hunting, they're docile as flounders."

"We even heard that there were Choosings where they could scarce get the giants to fight each other. That was when they had to start using the scent," the younger one interjected.

"How does using the scent make them fight?" Menol was only vaguely familiar with the procedure.

"The mate of a female in her estrus is separated from her, then she is herded near a young partnerless bull. More scent is used to overcome the new bull's natural reluctance to approach her, but he's restrained, and can't approach. The scent, and not allowing her too near him, and of course the dark feeling of going against his in-

stinct, works the bull into a frenzy. It's at that moment that the rightful mate is herded into the arena, and he's frenzied thinking his mate is in danger." The old Mog pulled at his mouth as if there were a bitter taste. Menol had as little liking for it, now that he understood how the fight was provoked.

"What you are saying is that the killers have become unpredictable?" Menol asked.

"The killers are just a part of it," the old one said, crossing his scarred muscular arms. Menol could tell by the thrust of the Mog's jaw that he was hearing the truth, but he still had to get them to do their jobs. Something in what they were carefully leaving unsaid was what interested Menol most.

"Why do you think this is happening? Is it something that is discussed by all the netters?" Menol wanted to know. Both netters shifted uneasily. They looked at each other, and it was the older one who reluctantly spoke.

"We do discuss it—often—and most netters agree we never should have stopped choosing Merras to Between." The other one nodded solemnly. It took courage for these Mogs to say this, especially to an Elder. It was heresy, and they must have had a strong mutual belief among them to take the risk.

"Go on." Menol kept his voice neutral.

"As you know, netters don't get back to the Caverns much. We can spend five or six moons out at sea, and there not being much to do at night, it's customary for the netters to tell stories after the day's work is done. They're not so much what you'd call stories, not made up, but more like history." He paused a moment to check with his friend to see how he was doing. His friend motioned for him to go on. "The stories that've been passed along are old. Nobody knows how old. Netters would rather lose a good fish than a good story. But according to some, five, six hundred winters ago, things were different in the sea. The Merras, vain as everyone says they are, were the only ones who could Between. And when they did, the sea must've been a sight to behold."

"Or so the stories say," Menol reminded the netter.

"Maybe so." The Mog sounded defensive, but determined to make his point. "But there were eggs. And the storms weren't so foul, and there were fish to be had.

The sea was a bounty, and a Mog didn't have to swim moons to find food." The netter looked as if he could go on forever, but the claims he was making, and the doubts that were awakening in Menol, the young Elder found disturbing.

"And you don't think you, or any netter before you, has ever embellished a story, or history as you call it, to make it better? Can you be certain these stories weren't wishes strung together by lonely Mogs in the open sea?" Menol asked him.

"That is not my custom," the Mog replied, though he flushed red.

"All right, I didn't mean to question your word." Menol was careful not to say he believed them, but his tone was genuine enough to take the bristles from the netter's scales. "There's nothing we can do about the way things once were. We need a new Between, and to find her, we must have a Choosing. We all know, for whatever reasons, the Merra no longer compete. What was, is gone." The netters nodded sadly. "We need the killer whales," Menol reiterated. "Just tell me what you need to get the job done." The netters checked with each other, as if they had not expected to be listened to.

"We need more netters," the older one said.

"I'll hire them in the morning," Menol answered.

"And we may have to use mun on the killers," the younger one said, and both of them looked slightly shamed. It was a numbing drug sometimes used to hunt larger game. Most netters avoided it, for it had the taint of cheating. It was easy to get, and one of the few crops the Ghrismogs grew consistently and well. Mogs addicted to it were called sinkers, because they spent all their time on the bottom. This they did by swallowing enough small rocks to weight them, and once bottom bound, their only concerns were how to get more mun, and an occasional fish to sustain them.

"You must use it?" Menol asked. "The killers are as uncontrollable as that?" He watched the two Mogs nod ominously. "If you must then, as long as there is none left in them on the day of the Choosing." Menol saw their faces harden. "What is it?" he asked.

"We're afraid it'll be a blood war," the younger one said.

"Afraid there'll be a frenzy," the older one added.

"You mean you think the killers might hurt each other or one of the maids?" Menol knew only that once the killer whales were herded in to the Center Place for the fight, it was up to the prospective Betweeners to stop it. From Menol's understanding, the task was not as impossible as it sounded, because in truth, the killers were not overanxious to fight or kill each other. The netters seemed to think otherwise.

"Like we said before, things have been strange lately. No netter would be surprised if the killers started fighting and didn't quit, and that could begin a dark rot in the Balance." Menol was curious about this practical Mog's tremendous regard for the Balance. He had heard other netters and others of the simpler Mogs and Merramogs say the word with the same reverence.

"You are aware that here in the Caverns, some of us have lost touch with what you are daily aware of, and some of us haven't the understanding of the Balance that you do." Menol addressed himself to both of them. "I've heard theories about it, songs about it, but I would like to hear in your own words, what the Balance is to you." Menol thought they couldn't look more embarrassed if he'd caught them dancing with sea horses. Finally, the older one began, his eyes wide with the effort of explaining the unexplainable.

"What the Balance means to me? Surely you must know. . . ." He cleared his throat and frowned. There was a long pause, then the grizzled netter reconciled himself to the task. "Well, this was how it was taught to me, so I suppose the same will do for you. See, the Balance is a force invisible in the sea, all around us, all the time. The best way to explain it is to ask the question what really is there different about the water itself when it has sunlight streaming through it, and when it does not? You can't touch the light, you can't smell it. But it's there. The Balance is the same, all around us, all the time. But the Balance is not light, or no light, it's the balance of good and evil. For the most of it, it's like the sunlight. You can't smell it or feel it, but sometimes, some places you can. Like the deep holes, there the evil crawls out and clings to your heart. And once I accidentally came near the shedragon, and I felt light and good. Now how it is that some things are more good and others not, I don't know, but the way I understand it is that

every living creature has a piece of each in it, like every day has light and dark in it. From the lowliest of snails clear up to the killers and the Seadragons, with ourselves somewhere in the middle and closer to the snails, I'm afraid." Menol couldn't help but smile, and the netter paused, frowning.

"But because of the natural inclination of things, the evil side is easier to—well, it's easier. Like it's easier to drift than to swim. And because it's easier, and because you can nearly always count on Mogs to go the easy way, the whole ocean would be in a whirlpool going down a black hole if it wasn't for the Seadragons. You see, the Seadragon is the only creature in the sea who is mostly good. I don't know why, I can only tell you the way I felt when I was near one, but the Seadragons, they balance it out. See? The Balance? And you can see it weighs on them by looking in their eyes. Those of us who've seen them in their natural homes can tell you, for the most part, the Seadragons are so burdened down they give off sorrow. The burden for them is getting worse all the time. It's too much for them alone. The Mogmaids don't. Between, they just count the Seadragon another pet, or like a necklace or something, and that's why there are no eggs. You only need to go out there to feel it."

"The Merras now have changed from the ones in your ancient stories," Menol reminded him.

The old netter shrugged stubbornly.

"Maybe so," he said. "The life does seem to have gone out of them." The gloom in both the netters filled the cave.

Menol tried to shake it off. "Thank you for telling me about the Balance," he said, "and you're right about one thing."

"About what?" the old netter asked.

"Netters are better storytellers than any I've heard." Menol could tell by the netter's reaction that he had caught the subtle criticism.

"Some are stories, and some are not." The netter bristled again.

Menol looked toward the entrance of his chamber and was glad to see Edam. All of this storytelling had left him feeling unsettled. It was good to see a levelheaded friend who could set right any nagging doubts that might have been sown by the two netters.

"I see you are still here, good," Edam addressed the two netters. "Has Menol answered your questions?"

"We have what we need, thank you, High Elder." The older netter still spoke for them. "We'll be going now, if we have your permission."

"Thank you for speaking your minds," Menol said sincerely. Honesty was normally thought a weakness unless it served a Mog's purpose. Edam smiled at them, and both Elders watched until the netters had disappeared. Edam sensed his young friend's discomfort.

"They were making doomsday predictions?" Edam asked.

"How did you know?" Menol was surprised.

"I remember my first Choosing, I heard the same warnings." Edam watched the furrow disappear from between Menol's brows.

"You know, Menol, this ability you have, to listen to all sides fairly, may bring you some disquiet, but I have learned after many years that this quality makes for the best leaders—" He held up his hand to stop Menol from protesting. "I know you are an Elder reluctantly, and that is your greatest strength."

Menol was grim. When he was chosen Elder, he agreed to it only temporarily, because he saw a great need and thought he could help. If there were some decisive battle, with real positions to defend, he would be more willing. But the running of the Caverns was nothing more than countless details gone over repeatedly day after day, argued among bickering Mogs in dark caves. "It is simply not to my liking, Edam. I am sorry."

"Do not be sorry—it is not to my liking either, and I think that is what makes me a good High Elder, and what will make you a better one, if you will ever change your mind."

Menol shook his head. "There is one thing I am curious about." He was still troubled by some of the things the netters had said.

"And what is that?" Edam watched his young friend.

"How did the Merrra drift from power? In truth, it sounds like they were more advanced in many ways than we. How did it happen?" Menol waited. Though Edam was thinking over his answer carefully, he had not been surprised by the question.

"You know about the reefs, don't you? And the territorial quality of the fish that live in the reef?"

"As much as most know," Menol answered, curious about the turn of the conversation.

"If there is one fish that wants to own the reef, and another that cares little for owning it, to which will the reef belong?" Edam asked.

"To the one that takes it," Menol answered.

"Precisely," said Edam.

8

The Merra Legacy



The morning light crept beneath Elan's shady overhang in the garden, waking her gently. She felt refreshed and strong. From her sleepnet, she looked up into the canopy of swaying trees. In her dreams, Maadu had been happy.

Elan remembered watching the dolphin leave the previous morning. She had entered the garden, and despite her excitement at being there again, she was tired. She had found this overhang, shady and lulling, and fastened her sleepnet. In moments she had fallen into a deep sleep, which had lasted, she could tell by the pink hues of dawn, a full day and night.

Awakening once during the night in confusion, she thought she was still in Thon's cave, and that somehow the caged glowfish had escaped and come into her room. She soon realized what she was seeing was not in the water but beyond—stars, peeking through the window in the domed ceiling. They twinkled and surged on the water, and cast a blue light upon the growing things around her. The garden was as beautiful at night as it was during the day.

Elan stretched and looked around. This garden truly was of another world, and she reveled in her feelings of belonging. More so than at any other time in her life, she felt at home. The spice-sweet smells reminded her that she was ravenously hungry. She had been too tired upon arriving to even sample any of the new fruits that surrounded her. Now she couldn't wait.

After she slipped out of her sleepnet, feeling excited about all there was to learn in this garden, she swam toward the area in which the fruit trees grew. As she crossed the vast chamber she passed the entrance hole.

Next to the hole was an oddly shaped flat stone, encrusted with barnacles and bright starfish. It was obvious that the stone had been shaped by hand, and had a purpose. Elan cleared away some of the growth, leaned up the heavy piece, and saw that it was the same shape and size as the entrance hole. She rocked it back and forth until it fell into place with a thud. Now no light could pass into the chamber below, and even though the moss that grew in the passageways gave off a light of its own, this stone made the garden virtually impossible to discover by accident. Not only was this a sacred place full of Merra secrets, it was also a sanctuary that offered something rare in the sea—complete safety. No predators, no Ghrismogs.

Elan looked around as she swam to the fruit trees. She watched the shadows of the swaying sea grasses meander across the sandy bottom, over the backs of shells and smaller, bright plants. Even the sand was different, white and glistening.

The prospect of having time to explore every part of the garden was thrilling. As she swam beneath the coral arches, she could hear the clicking sounds of the crabs and the other reef creatures, and she noted how lucky they were to have drifted into paradise. As lucky as she was.

She looked up into the fruit trees that surrounded her, and she chose three of the most unusual-looking fruits. She held them against her breast as she swam to a section she had not yet investigated. One of her first projects was going to be weaving carrying bags and storage baskets. She bit into the soft skin of a small green fruit. Inside, the flesh was a pearly white, with a starfish pattern of deep red at the center. She wished somehow Maadu could have seen this beauty. Elan knew the sorrowful thoughts of her loss would creep into her garden, and she knew if she was lucky, soon the thoughts would come and go without the sting of grief.

Elan bit into the second piece of fruit she had chosen. It was pale yellow and slightly bland. As she ate it, she looked around at what had been the area devoted to different grasses for weaving. The variety was amazing. She was familiar with only one or two of them. With these grasses of every color, some fine and jet black, others as rosy as dawn, she could weave things more

beautiful than she ever imagined. As she swam over and through the grasses, she noticed something following her, something small. Whatever it was, it was careful to stay directly behind her. Elan caught only brief glances of the shy creature. She stopped a moment, feigning interest in a large clamshell beneath her; when she swam down to look at it more closely, she turned around just enough to see what it was.

Elan smiled. It was a baby turtle, no bigger than the palm of her hand. Its feet paddled furiously to keep out of her line of sight. Elan knew sea turtles were some of the most private creatures in the sea, and she wondered why this one had risked being seen. She sent the baby turtle soothing cross-speak messages to keep it from fleeing, but the tiny creature was still terrified. Perhaps it was hungry.

Elan hovered, seemingly admiring the giant clamshell, and bit into the last piece of fruit. This one was delicious. It was a pale red-brown color, and spicy sweet. The texture was firm and moist, and it was immediately her favorite. She was glad this would be her token of friendship to the turtle as she broke off several small pieces and let them drift in his direction. Still pretending not to watch, she saw him stretch out his neck to reach the treats. She knew a creature as shy as a turtle would have to be allowed to make the first overtures. She would not rush him. She broke off another piece and started for the surface, hoping he would come.

One of the areas she was most curious about was above the water. The pictures on the walls. What would they tell? Except for stories, pictures and coral paintings were all they had of history. Elan glanced back before she reached the surface to look for the small turtle. It was intently chewing the last of her offering.

She blew the last breath of water from her lungs as she rose into the dry air of the upper chamber. Now that she had time to study it all, there was much more to see than what she remembered.

The sounds above were different than beneath the water. They were much louder, more defined. Many of the rocks that rose just above the surface were covered with soft mosses. Droplets of water fell from the wet moss into the still pool of seawater, and the pattern of their falling created delicate melodies.

Several of the rocks that faced the walls had flat areas carved in them. Elan assumed these were for sitting upon while looking at the art. Had Merra of old spent much time in dry air?

Elan had spent some time in dry air, for she liked the warmth of the sun and the sounds of seabirds, but it was so heavy in the air. Sitting upon the rocks, it felt more as if the rocks pressed down on her. There was nothing like the weightlessness of underwater. The poor heavy Mogs, never knowing the joy of soaring on the currents. Poorer still were the split tails, doomed to life in the dry world. Elan had heard a storyteller in Thon's cave once tell how it was above. "Like always keeping your tail on the bottom." Never an up or under, never a weightless spin or loop, only the bottom. It was a terrible thought. Elan was distracted by a wall she could see at the far end of the garden. She swam toward it, staring at the many drawings along the way. The wall appeared larger as she neared it, and made of stone. She rounded the end of it, and once behind the wall, the sight she beheld made her heart beat furiously.

"Seadragons," Elan whispered, and her voice echoed back at her. It startled her, but she spoke again, and soon became accustomed to it. It was as if the sounds were meant to be a part of this strange room.

On the wall of this hidden section of the cavern was a mosaic made from small pieces of mother-of-pearl. The delicate shading made the Seadragons appear three-dimensional, and they glowed in the morning brightness. These mosaic dragons were much smaller than the ones in the Grand Chamber, but their luminescence made them seem alive and magical.

Elan swam to a flat rock below the mosaic and easily pulled herself onto it. She took a deep breath and studied the artwork.

The first detail that struck her—and her disbelief soon became pride—was that those who tended the Seadragons were not Ghrismogs; they were Merra. Could these be Betweens? Whatever they were, they were certainly allowed near the Seadragons. What else could this mosaic be but some record of ancient times? The more she stared at this depiction, the more certain she was that these Merra were Betweens. Though this was thrilling to contemplate, it was also a wrenching thought. Had the

Merra always been Betweens? How had that changed, and where were they now? It was clear, when she thought about it, that Ghrismogs had neither the ability nor the inclination to sense or heal another's ills. One only had to observe healers to know this was true. So why would it be assumed that a Ghrismog could Between? And how had they come to be Betweens? Elan had never heard a netter's tales, nor had she heard any rumors that it was the Merra who should Between.

In the picture, Elan recognized the annoying leechfish that one of the Merra was chasing away from the Seadragon. Leechfish could grow as big as an arm and attached themselves to larger creatures, feeding on their blood. If they were not discovered in time, they could burrow deep into the flesh, and pulling them off left a wound that was difficult to heal.

It looked as if another of the Merras was packing bottom sand around the head of a leechfish that had attached itself near the gill of the shedragon. The shedragon in the mosaic was getting ready to sit her nest; her sorrowful eyes were made less so by the warmth in them as she looked down upon her eggs.

Elan's concentration was interrupted by a fluttering sound on the water. She turned to find the turtle, too curious to stay away, his small feet slapping at the water.

"There you are," Elan said, and sent him a cross-speak message of welcome. She didn't know how much a turtle might understand, but she was glad for the company. "Are you going to show me around your home?" she asked. She watched the small turtle lose what little courage he had and, with a splash, turn head down, his back feet paddling ineffectually at the air and his tail bobbing toward the sky. At last he managed to paddle his back half under, and Elan laughed. She watched the surface of the water around her to see if the turtle might reappear. While she waited, an old word came back to her, a Merra name her mother used to call her. The word was "tookki," and as far as Elan could remember it was a shortened version of the Merra word for explorer. She thought it would be a good name for her turtle, who fought his fears at every moment. A true explorer.

<Would you like the name Tooki?> she said to the surface of the water, but still her new friend did not reappear.

Elan turned her attention back to the mosaic.

Around the borders of the picture were clusters of different leaves and plants. She stared at these a long time, wondering why they were used so conspicuously. The plants the artists had chosen to portray were not beautiful. They weren't colorful or interestingly shaped, and none of them bore fruit or flowers.

These certainly must be the plants the Squid mentioned when he said, "before Ghrismogs." Could they be healing plants? And if they were, were they only for the dragons, or could they be used on Merra or Mog? Elan couldn't see what was being used by the Merras in the artwork. Would Tia know any of these plants?

Elan closed her eyes a moment and let the small tears counteract the unaccustomed dryness of the air. She let the melodies of the water droplets echoing through the cavern calm her growing confusion. At every turn was some new mystery, and the questions she had about her lost culture pressed upon her. She kept reminding herself that there would be time, she had Tia, she had the Squid to ask. But beneath all of her newfound knowledge a new question was forming. It left her feeling unsettled.

The Choosing approached, she would not be allowed to compete when, if what this depictions told were true, she had every right to try. She couldn't very well take the Elders here to prove it to them. But the Nemu had looked at her with such expectation. Her hand automatically covered the luti shell. She would have to fight every Mog in the Center Place before they would let her near a Seadragon. Better to keep busy and forget. Somehow, she knew everything she learned here would make it more difficult, not easier, to forget.

She opened her eyes and continued her study of the mosaic. She leaned as close as she could to see if what she suspected was true. It was. Most of the Merramaids and men had their mouths open in song. Was that some clue to the songs that haunted her? Did the Seadragons like being sung to?

This thought filled her with sorrow. There was no one left to sing to the dragons. If she felt lonely, how did the Seadragons feel, with all their burdens to bear alone? Now only Ghrismaids sang to them. Elan had heard Ghrismaids singing once or twice and it was a horrid

croaking, a noise like bones breaking. It was not a sound to soothe an ancient soul.

Elan sang a short song, soft and melancholy. The way the sounds came back to her in this echoing place made her feel she was surrounded by other Merra, and she mourned for all of them. Before, she had not known what it was she longed for. Now she was learning, and the hurt of her loss was fresh, though the Merras as depicted in their garden had been gone for centuries. There was still much to be learned from this mosaic, but Elan wanted to go on and see the others.

She slipped into the water and swam around the wall into the main cavern and toward the white beach that spilled from beneath the nearest wall. As she got closer she saw that this record was of a lone Merramaid who looked as if she were beneath a vast cloud of small fish. The most intriguing part was that the thousands of fish were not in a shapeless school above her, but in a configuration of some sort. Elan did not know what it was that the school had become, but it was magnificent.

She swam to the next drawing and pulled herself up onto the mossy rock that faced it. This picture was even stranger. It showed many Merra in a circle around a hole. They all had their mouths open in song, but their faces were not tranquil as they had been in all the other drawings. Here the Merra were tense and determined. This drawing frightened her. Something about the hole spoke of evil, and she wondered why the Merra had gone there.

Her thoughts were again interrupted by the turtle. She gazed down at him happily, and repeated his new name several times. Tooki's company was welcome, no matter how reluctant it might be.

<Are you still hungry, Tooki?> she asked. This time he didn't flee, but bobbed on the surface paddling. His face looked so frightened and eager that Elan wished she could make him unafraid of her. It would take time.

<I don't have any more fruit for you, but we can go and get some if you like.> Until Tooki grew—which for turtles took a very long time—his mouth would not be powerful enough to break through most of the fruits' skins. She didn't mind that he was fond of her for food. He would be her companion, and she would take care of him.

He was not a Seadragon, but his being there made her feel needed, and less lonely.

With one more troubled glance at the strange drawing of the hole, Elan slipped carefully into the water. She didn't want to startle Tooki, who looked ready to flee at any provocation. Together they swam, Elan slowly and Tooki tentatively, back down to the garden.

When they were nearly to where the fruit trees grew, Elan stopped suddenly. She recognized one of the leaves from the borders of the mosaic. The plant was very shiny and oily looking, and the thick leaves had elongated yellow spots.

Something bumped into her. It was Tooki, unable to stop as suddenly as she had. He tried to scurry away, and she felt sorry that he was so afraid. She gave him a helpful push, and he turned to look at her again once he had reached a safe distance. His dark eyes were bright with alarm.

<I'll try to remember, no quick stops, all right?> she told him, and pulled the long billowing hair back from her face. As soon as she was certain Tooki would survive his fright, she turned her attention back to the curious leaves.

She pulled one leaf from the plant and felt it. It was nearly as smooth as the Nemu's skin and very flexible. Elan took a small bite and immediately spat it out. It was very bitter. From now on she would be more careful.

She glanced toward Tooki just as he swallowed up the piece she had spat out. He spat it out too, and Elan laughed again at his expression. He still looked expectant, hoping the next offering would be better.

A clear oily fluid leaked out from where she had bitten the leaf. She touched it and rubbed it between her fingers. She knew at once it would be good for her skin, so she rubbed some on her arms and immediately felt a stinging sensation in the scratches she had gotten on her first squeeze into the garden. Perhaps the tingling was a sign of healing.

<This must be one of the leaves the Merra were using on the Seadragons in the mosaic.> The leaves and plants on the borders must be the most useful ones. Which uses they served Elan would have to learn herself, or wait until she saw Tia again.

She moved to the next tall plant and took one of its

long thin leaves that clustered in thick fronds swaying to and fro on the surge. It was a dull purple red, and when she took a small bite, ready to spit it out, she found it was delicious. It was spicy sweet and filled her whole head with a pleasant warmth.

Judging by the taste and smell, she recognized this as the predominant aroma that drifted on the currents through the passages. By the reaction it was causing in the turtle, Elan knew it must be one of his favorite tastes. This leaf was soft enough for Tooki to have fed on on his own, yet he waited for her to offer it. He suffered with indecision, whether to come closer to eat, or keep a safe distance but risk being forgotten in the feast.

Elan held a piece of the leaf toward the turtle. His neck stretched out as far as it could, and though he was still far away, he could not make himself come any closer.

She broke off half a leaf and pushed it toward him. It drifted in his direction; Tooki made a mad dash forward to snatch it, then paddled away to eat it.

Elan swam along a row of plants. Clusters of them were alike, then a new kind would begin. The centuries of neglected growth had squeezed them together in a disorderly jungle.

When this garden had been planted, Elan thought, it was more likely that it had been done in secret. Why else all the precautions? The narrow passageways, the entrance stone? It was probably meant to be a storage place for what the Merra needed and feared they might lose to time—or to the encroaching Ghrismogs. When the Merra had been in power, had there been great fields and forests of these plants everywhere?

As Elan swam through the many rows, silky leaves swayed rhythmically on the surge. That there was a surge inside the cavern meant there was a place, or perhaps many narrow fissures, where fresh sources of seawater entered. This would have to be for the health of the coral and many of the other creatures that lived inside the garden. Somehow the water that entered was sweetened. Already, Elan's memory of the "outside world" was dimming. She knew everything beyond the walls of the garden was different. The water out there seemed tainted. She remembered several occasions when she had sat on rocks near beaches in the open air. Sometimes the tides had driven in small mountains of seaweed. It lay there in

the sun growing more foul until all the air was thick with the stench. That was what had become of the entire sea, she thought. The Ghrismogs had turned it foul.

Elan let herself drift toward the surface. She paddled a moment, then floated onto her back and stared at the moon slit of blue sky.

Thoughts washed over her, about her discovery of the garden and what it meant. She was a link between the past and this perilous present. Had she not accidentally found this place, eventually the coral beds would have sealed the entrance like a tomb. As fewer and fewer Merras remembered, the garden and the legacy it held would be as if they had never existed. Words came to her. "Start a ripple, change the sea, all that was will ever be." She did not know what the words meant, but she did know that somehow this garden had come to be hers. It was her sanctuary and in it she would learn of the lost Merras. What she would do with this new knowledge she did not know, but she was certain that nothing in her life would be as it had been.

9

Groff's Plan



Kili did not take her eyes off Menol. This meeting of the Elders was boring, and if it hadn't been for her interest in Menol, she would have insisted that they speak with her first instead of making her sit through all of these endless details.

How the Choosing was organized held little interest for her. She would be the Between, no matter what these old flounders decided. She would be Between because it was what she wanted, and Kili could not remember a time when she had not gotten what she wanted. She had many talents of her own she could put to use during the Choosing, and if those failed—which Kili was certain they would not—she always had her uncle. Groff was a Mog few dared to cross.

She watched Menol and knew the day would come when she could command him to come to her, the Between, like a pet fish. And he would have to come. That was the fun of it.

She wrapped one of the tendrils of her thick black hair around her fingers and willed him to look at her. He did not, but Kili kept her anger to herself and imagined her revenge. She would not forget; he would be made to pay for ignoring her.

Other Mogs desired her. Two had even fought each other and died. Though it was sad, it had been thrilling, and had done much to further her reputation. Kili knew she was beautiful. Her eyes were only slightly larger than the Merras', and she wasn't as thick as most Ghrismaids.

Kili looked harder at Menol and wondered if he might prefer the insipid creatures. He didn't dare, she thought. No, if he was as anxious for power as Groff said he was,

Menol would have to blend eventually with a Mogmaid. Kili knew precisely which Mogmaid that would be.

She reasoned that the disdain she felt from Menol was inspired by her relation to Groff. She couldn't help it if he was her uncle. She would use that argument as soon as she had the occasion with Menol. It would help, she knew.

The two of them hated each other, but Groff hated Menol more. Kili knew there were many reasons, but mainly it was because Menol, like Edam, could not be intimidated. Kili had never learned why her uncle bore such hatred toward the Merras, and even she was reluctant to ask. Next to Edam, her uncle was the most powerful Mog in the Caverns. He was certainly richer than anyone else, maybe even richer than the Caverns themselves. Once when she and her sisters had been very young, Groff had taken them to a treasure hold. He had made them shut their eyes on their way there. Of course she had peeked. They passed from one long tunnel to the next, and finally arrived in a small cave filled with pearls and split-tail treasures of coins and stones. Groff had looked so pleased as their eyes grew large at the sight. She and her sisters had squealed and rushed from one treasure to the next. Even as a child, Kili knew that Groff needed admiration. What good was treasure unless it could bring you that? Groff had given them each a large pearl. Many times since then Kili had wished she remembered how to find that place.

She too found Groff repugnant, but what he could do for her was worth any amount of feigned affection. She broke from her thoughts when she heard Menol's name called.

It was Menol's turn to report the news from the netters, and he was glad to give it because it was good news. He was also glad because it would give him a chance to move around as he spoke, so he would not have to feel the incessant stare of the Ghrismaid.

If she hadn't been Groff's niece, he might have found her enticing. She was beautiful, her lips full, her dark eyes a world of promises. But Menol sensed cruelty there, and unlike some Mogs, he did not find that stimulating.

Menol didn't know why Groff had brought her to this meeting, but he suspected something devious, something to do with the Choosing. Why not? Menol thought. If

Groff's niece were made Between, it would enhance his position. Menol had to remind himself that not all Mogs were as bad as Groff. Edam, and Menol's own family, were cause enough for belief in their kind. Menol looked about the chamber and began.

"The netters have sent word that they have had luck, and have located two killer bulls. No lives were lost." Menol always felt as if he were talking to Edam alone.

"The killers are being herded to the Caverns?" Edam asked.

"Yes," Menol answered, careful to avoid Kili's stare, "as was planned. The first should be here on the new moon, and the second will be kept at a safe distance until the day of the Choosing."

"Did they have to use the mun?" Groff asked. To Menol it sounded like a challenge, and as he always did, Menol directed his answer to Edam. Edam often told Menol how this rankled Groff, but Menol continued this habit out of a general disgust at having to deal with someone he considered dishonest. Menol would not speak to him were he to meet him in the Center Place, and he considered their being fellow Elders a forced closeness.

"Only on the second. The extra netters have made the herding less dangerous to all." Menol looked around the chamber for any further questions. Kili's eyes flashed when he looked at her, and her hand "absently" moved to her breast.

"Have preparations been made for the Elders to be carried to the hole?" Groff asked again. Menol knew his interest in the matter was personal. Groff had grown too obese to travel under his own power. Even their relative weightlessness underwater did not help him. Moons before, Groff had manipulated enough of the council to vote that the Elders be carried the great distance. "In keeping with the honor due an Elder," he had argued. This not only spared Groff an effort he would find impossible, but allowed him to not be embarrassingly set apart.

"Your trip will be effortless, I assure you," Menol answered, trying to keep the criticism from his voice. He had no intention of allowing himself to be carried.

"Have you been able to inspect the hole?" Edam asked, and Menol noted the wary tone at mentioning the bottomless pit the netters claimed was full of evil. It was an eerie place whether one believed in evil or not.

"I've been once to be certain no obstructions had fallen in, and I will be returning at least one more time before the Choosing," Menol answered. Several of the Elders shifted uneasily, glad not to have his responsibility as far as the hole was concerned. As logical as Mogs were, it was almost amusing the way a mention of the hole could unsettle them. Conversely, it was odd, that their belief in the Seadragons and the part they played in the Balance could be ignored. Evil was more real to them. Only their fear of the hole gave them reason to believe in the Balance. The only one who did not seem affected by mention of the hole was the maid, and she was the only one going down it, if Menol's guess was correct. Why else would she be here?

"There has been some outcry at our voting down the safety nets in the hole." Kado sounded apologetic about bringing it up. It was obvious he had been made to promise he would.

"May I speak," Kili asked. Menol couldn't help but notice that even though she had posed it as a question, it was clearly a statement of intent.

"My uncle made mention to me about this net. I will be one of the maids competing for Between, and I must say that your decision to deny the nets was a sound one. If the nets were used, whether the Between-to-be made use of it or not, she would always know it had been there, and never know if her courage was false because of it. That would not be an easy thing to live with and, in truth, makes the feat less honorable." Her eyes were slightly slanted; she used them expertly to draw her listeners in. Edam nodded in admiration of her words, though Menol thought them practiced.

"That is precisely why we determined it unwise." Edam smiled, his charm as powerful a tool as her own. "And we are indeed lucky to have a maid as beautiful and courageous as you are, competing for Between."

"Thank you, High Elder." Kili beamed. There was something too calculated about her warmth, Menol thought, but he did not doubt she meant what she said about the net. The other Elders stared openly at the maid—obviously part of Groff's strategy. Though the maids competed for Between, the final decision was still left to the Elders, and Groff had to know that a close look at his niece would be in her favor later. Menol

wondered briefly how long it would take Groff to make a play for Edam's position as High Elder, once his niece was made Between. It was not a pleasant thought.

"I thank the Elders for allowing me to be here," she said. Menol was curious to see what reason she would come up with for attending a meeting of the Elders. "I have a difficult question which I fear was the only one my uncle was unable to answer for me." Groff acknowledged the subtle flattery. Kili's eyes moved across all their faces. "Are true Merras forbidden to compete in the Choosing?" Several of the Elders exchanged quizzical glances. Menol did not know the answer himself, only that it was discouraged. It was likely that Groff had put her up to the question. Had they also heard the spreading rumor that Merras made the only true Betweens?

"They are not forbidden," Edam answered without hesitation, being the Mog most versed in law. "The rule was set down by Ghrismog Elders centuries ago that anyone should be allowed to compete; Merra, Mogs, maids or males, it matters not. But being a Between is a life commitment to the Seadragons, and as all of us sadly know, the Merra are not what they once were. They are easily distracted." Edam studied the maid and went on. "It is an honor that goes hand in hand with sacrifice, one that evidently asks too much of our playful Merra. None have competed for many centuries, at least to my knowledge." The sacrifice to which Edam referred was the Between's virtual isolation from civilization. Once she became Between, the maid went wherever the Seadragons went, though through her messengers she could have whatever she asked for. Once or twice this provision of the agreement had led to problems, but the maids were indulged. Rather than risk unsettling the Seadragons by breaking the bond that had developed, it was safer to wait out the fifty-year liaison.

"It would be no sacrifice to me." Kili smiled. "The honor of being Between would far outweigh any self-denial." Menol thought the way she played with the long string of pearls at her breast was a far more eloquent statement about her thoughts on self-denial. This maid would deny herself nothing. Menol remembered Edam's words: Those who take, have. That was something Menol would not soon forget.

Kili, sensing the meeting drawing to a close, cast down

her eyes and touched the backs of her fingertips to her forehead in the Merra sign of respect. A nice touch, Menol thought. He wondered if Groff had coached her in this as well.

Menol remembered the last time he had seen that done and how differently he had felt about its sincerity. The beautiful Merra. Heat rushed through him at this memory, and he secretly cursed himself for allowing the vision to affect him the way it did. Lost in his half dream, he looked up to find Kili staring at him once again. He recognized a look that was clearly a sexual invitation as she misread his momentary expression of remembered desire for the Merra. Menol had to hold her gaze, or give in to his embarrassment. Kili was encouraged and looked slightly triumphant until Menol looked away. Menol sensed her stiffening in anger.

"If there is no more discussion, we can conclude our meeting," Edam said. He swam toward Menol, and after a friendly tilt of his head toward Kili, he and Menol left the chamber. Kili watched them leave then turned all her attention to the remaining Elders. They gathered around her; it looked as if she were already holding court. They laughed, and she filled them with admiration. After a short while she bid them farewell and joined her uncle who was leaving the chamber.

Groff and Kili swam slowly. When they passed into the Grand Chamber, Kili didn't bother to look up at the imposing coral painting of the Seadragons but let her eyes travel the length of the vast chamber looking for Menol. She could not see him.

"I'm certain he's gone to his own chambers," Groff noted. "He showed more interest in you than he has in most maids."

"He isn't very friendly." She frowned.

"When you are Between, perhaps you can improve his disposition." Groff's eyes narrowed and Kili knew what he was thinking. If she commanded Menol to join her, he would have to, according to unwritten law. Even being an Elder would not protect him. Kili knew that was why Groff was helping her—at least it was one of the reasons. With Menol removed, the way would be clear for her uncle. They would both have what they wanted. Kili knew her uncle would do anything to be rid of the threat Menol posed to his own power, and it was safer than

trying to murder the young Elder, who was next in line for Edam's position. Everyone knew Edam hoped to make Menol his successor, but it would not happen without a fight. Groff didn't believe Menol's claim that he was not interested in ruling the Caverns, and he was ready to do battle, in his own way, to take power. But no fight would be necessary as long as Kili became Between. This was a goal each was determined to reach.

"Have you found me teachers?" Kili asked under her breath. This time it was Groff who was distracted, dreaming of the day he would be High Elder. "Uncle," she whispered loudly, "have you found teachers?"

"The very best." His mouth opened and closed as he contemplated his plan. "I have found several Merramog, more Merra than Mog. They know the songs, and can teach you the Merra speaking." His expression darkened. "It's unfortunate there are no Merras to be had for your training, but they are worthless in that respect, and treacherous."

"These Merramogs are as good as a true Merra?" Kili asked.

"Don't worry, my niece. The teachers I have found will make you unbeatable in the competition," Groff said smugly.

"I am already unbeatable," Kili reminded him with confidence. Groff smiled, proud of her fierce determination. She would need it, and all the courage she could find.

"You will be more perfect than you already are, then." Groff picked his words carefully, for his niece must train. He would allow nothing to hinder his plans, leave nothing to chance.

"We must go through with all of this?" Kili was already beginning to begrudge all the time the training would take.

"Two short moons to ensure both of us all that we ever wanted. Come, Kili, you have heard the grumbling yourself, that there have been no eggs since the Ghrismogs came in power, and there is also a faint, but still significant resurgence in the myth that it was the Merra who were always meant to be Between." Groff made his voice heavy with warning.

"I have heard no such rumors." Kili could not keep the alarm from creeping into her cynical tone. "Are

you—will there be Merra competing? There is nothing to be done to . . . discourage them if they try?"

Groff raised his eyebrows with new respect. "Of course there is. Still, it is wiser that we take no chances." He looked squarely at his niece as they prepared to part. "I have arranged for the teachers to come to you tomorrow. You may keep which one pleases you, but keep in mind, you have only two moons to master all she has to teach you."

"I'll be ready." Kili forced herself to look fondly at her uncle, but could not bear the thought of kissing him good-bye.

"Learn well my niece, much depends on it." Groff smiled, and made a labored turn toward his own spacious living cave.

"I will, Uncle." Kili flicked her tail with a burst of energy and was gone.

10

Kagor the Hunter



Elan swam cautiously through the winding passages out of the garden, having carefully replaced the stone in the entrance. She let her fingers trail along the wall and shivered. Was it as cold as it seemed, or was it her imagination?

The woven basket full of samples from the garden brushed against her hip as she swam. After seven days in the garden, she was ready for her first foray back into the open sea. She wanted to see Tia, to ask her the questions the garden had awakened in her. Since it would be dangerous for her in the Caverns, Elan had to make this trip at night, the most hazardous time. She could not risk being seen by Thon, or anyone who might force her back to care for Maadu's children. And more important, she could not allow herself to be caught with the plants and fruits she carried. Elan wanted Tia to know of these, to smell them and trace their outlines. Perhaps she would remember their names and some of their uses. Elan had been careful to weave her basket from sea grass like that from around the Caverns. Though she had had time to make several beautiful weavings from the colorful grasses, these she had left behind beneath her overhang.

Elan reached the section of the passageway illuminated by the green moss. Her skin took on a ghostly hue and she shivered again. As she had many times from the garden, she sent a cross-speak message to Tia that she was coming. Earlier, Elan had tried asking Tia to come to the garden. Considering the danger of being discovered with such strange vegetation, Elan thought Tia's coming would be wiser. Nemu knew the way and could carry her. But she must not have mastered sending cross-

speaking any distances, because Tia had not come, and as far as Elan knew, there had been no answer. Fleeting images entered her thoughts—at times she thought she heard Tia's voice saying she could not come—but Elan reasoned she had imagined these things, or perhaps dreamed them.

But now it made no difference, her journey had begun. Moonlight glimmered ahead at the mouth of the crevice. Her plan was to spend just a short time with Tia, and before the dawn, she would leave the Caverns and go to see the Squid. She hoped he still wanted to see her. The more she discovered in the garden, the more confused she had become. Tia had said she was lucky to have cross-spoken with a Squid, and this one had offered to tell her of the old times. It was frightening to be near the truth of her past. When she had been young, she had often comforted herself with fantasies that the Merra had been magical beings, and that despite what everyone told her, she could be proud. But that fantasy had been harder to cling to as she had grown older. What would the Squid tell her? Whatever the truth might be, Elan was caught upon the current, and she knew she must continue learning of the lost Merra. She also knew it was the only diversion that would keep her from aching over the coming Choosing. She was more certain than ever, after the depictions she had seen in the garden, that the Merras had Betweened. Knowing they had changed nothing of the present. She was still—and ever would be—a Merra. And Merra would not be made Betweens by the Ghrismogs.

Good fortune and the Balance had allowed her path to cross the Squid's. She would stay as long as she could, then move on. She did not know where. The image she had of herself in the future, a Merra, silver-haired and wild, living alone at the edge of some deep-water trough, was not one to bring her peace.

Her imaginings quieted as she reached the sea fans that camouflaged the crevice mouth. She peered out carefully, knowing that netters did not hunt at night, but she took no chances and listened awhile before she swam out. The minute she was away from the garden passageways, an overwhelming sense of peril swept over her. There was a tangible malice in the sea, made more noticeable because of her time spent away from it in the garden. The safety of her sanctuary had lulled her senses.

Her instincts had been focused on deciphering mysteries, not on protection. In a wave of panic, she was consumed by a deathly chill. She felt surrounded by predators and every conceivable danger. She stopped suddenly to gather her nerve and to peer into the darkness around her. Would she catch a glint of moonlight in the eye of a white shark? Or a deadly blue? Something bumped into her back and Elan screamed and spun around. Barely visible was the retreat of the small turtle, his legs paddling in a terrified blur.

Elan felt a tiny portion of her fear fade as she caught up with Tooki. Her own fright had probably been amplified by the cross-spoken fears of the turtle.

She had no idea he had been following her, and she wondered how he had gotten out when she had closed the stone so quickly behind her. Her heart went out to him, since she knew the courage it must have taken for him to venture outside the garden. He had no way of knowing what a terrible journey he was undertaking. Elan thought about taking him back, but she was ready to leave, and was selfishly glad again for his company. The whole time she had been in the garden he had never ventured any closer to her; it completely surprised her that he had followed. Elan swam in front of him so he would recognize her in the midst of his fright. She hovered just in front of him, and even though the moonlight provided little light, she sensed the exact moment Tooki knew it was her, not a threatening shape in the darkness. His furious paddling never slackened as he made straight for Elan and buried himself in the hair that floated near her neck. She could feel him nestling there, and she floated motionlessly until his fear subsided. Having Tooki to worry over made her forget some of her own fears.

There was no time to waste. She had to get to Tia and away again before light. She untangled Tooki from her hair and gently placed him in the woven basket she carried over her shoulder. Perhaps the smells of familiar things would help him on his first—and difficult—journey.

The currents were strange tonight, tugging first in one direction, then another. At intervals, the clouds covered the moon, and Elan had to stop, unable to move in a sightless web. It was difficult to keep her bearings. At times, when the moon reappeared, she glanced down at bottom rocks and growth racing by, knowing she was

being whisked silently on some speeding current. As they slowed, Elan had to correct her course, sighting upon familiar rock forms that guided her back to the Caverns. Everything was bathed in an eerie blue light.

At last the outermost reef became discernible, and a decision had to be made. Tia lived on the opposite side of the Caverns, so Elan either had to cross the Center Place or continue around the outside perimeter of the reef. Each had its own separate dangers; again Elan tried to calm herself. She had never felt so frightened, and she knew it was because she had softened in the garden. Now every nerve in her body screamed danger and she had no way to determine how real these instinctual warnings were.

Elan chose her way. She would remain in the open sea rather than hazard a chance meeting this late with a Mog. Now that she had the reef to travel along, it would be easier, but she had to hurry. Time had been lost in the strange currents. If only she had been able to cross-speak distances. Tia could have experienced the garden for herself, and Elan would have been spared this sickening fear.

She swam on silently through the darkness. The water was so cold it nearly burned. Very slowly, a new sensation began to creep over her. A single warning of danger defined itself amid her muddled fears. It was the unmistakable presence of a predator, and some small part of this horror was familiar.

Elan had no time to wonder. She drew in her basket and the turtle. Tooki was trembling again, certainly sensing the danger she had. Elan settled to the bottom, purposefully and silently whipping up bottom sand with her tail to mask her scent. She was careful to stay as calm as she could, knowing it was panic that the predators sensed, and followed. She could feel Tooki grow more calm as well, trusting that she could protect them. Elan wished she were as easily fooled.

She held her breath and let herself be carried by the current, hoping it carried her in the direction she wished. She continued to whisk up bottom sand to fill the water around her with muddling scents. Where was the predator? An unrelenting terror still pressed over her. A strand of seaweed brushed by; peering in that direction, she swam into a small clump, tall enough to hide her in the

darkness. She waited, trying to make out anything familiar in the blackness. For a moment the clouds parted and the blue light of the moon illuminated everything. A shadow passed not far from her, and a memory so alive with horror filled her that she choked back a scream. The shadow hesitated as if it knew she was there. She quickly reached for her shoulder to hide the scar that encircled it. It was as if the scar were an eye, a blinking beacon that would draw this creature to her. The outline of his hunting sharks was visible, all poised around him to do his bidding. Just as suddenly as they had appeared, they disappeared when the moon was hidden by another passing cloud. Elan quickly whisked up more bottom sand and tried to calm the terror, whirling like the bottom sand inside of her. She remembered every moment of that terrible day long winters before. After the hunter had disappeared with his sharks, she had gone back to her living cave to have her wound tended before it became infected. She had learned from her foster brothers that the killer's name was Kagor, and his legend was frightful to even the most stout of heart. Elan had had nightmares for moons, and Maadu had come to her sleepnet to calm her fears of the dreadful Kagor.

Elan breathed more deeply and waited for her heart to stop pounding. She stayed hidden in her clump of weed, one hand over the luti shell, knowing she could not call the Nemu. This was not the time. If the clouds would grant her a few more moments of darkness, perhaps the shadow would pass. In this night full of danger Elan wondered if she was creating her worst fears. She looked at the scar that circled her shoulder again to be certain it was only flesh and would not draw the killer to her. All about her was the blackness, and she tried to laugh at her fears. What would Kagor be doing in the middle of nowhere, hunting with his blues?

Elan felt her panic subside. Had the predator passed? Had there ever been a hunter? She waited until the moonlight returned; from her cover of sea grass, she saw nothing. She patted Tooki and ventured out cautiously. She wondered how much darkness was left, then hurried on her way.

The clouds passed, and Elan was left clear moonlight by which to navigate. Familiar sections of the reef told

her she was now making good speed, and except for eels, Elan was aware of no danger.

In the basket Tooki calmed, and Elan wondered if she should take him back to the garden before she left to see the Squid. What if Tooki were to find another way out and try to follow her again? If she wasn't with him, he wouldn't last a moment in the open sea. Elan hoped her decision to take him was not based on selfishness. All her introspection, and the discovery of her ancestors, who were as lost as foam on sand, had left her more aware of her loneliness. She had felt alone before, but had been kept so busy working that she had no time to ponder it. Tooki was her family now. She would take care of him.

Sooner than she had anticipated, Elan began to recognize the sea formations that told of her nearness to the southern entrance to the Caverns—a stone archway and a nearly round black rock. She glanced up to locate the moon and saw that she had less time than she had hoped for, but enough to speak with Tia and be away before the light. Elan was about to cross the outer reef when she heard Tia in cross-speak.

<We are coming to you, Elan. Hide yourself quickly, then tell us as best you can where to find you.> A barely controlled urgency sounded in her voice.

Elan was startled. <Where are you?> she asked. Tia's Nemu undoubtedly accompanied her.

<We come, please hide yourself, child.> This came as a command. Elan looked around in the moonlight. In the distance she made out the dark patches of sea vegetable. The tangled masses sprawled out nearly the distance from the second to the third reef. It was a favorite hiding place for Mog children. Elan swiftly headed for it and explained as she went.

<Tia? Nemu? I am nearing the sea-vegetable field, and the moon is at my back.> She longed to ask them what was wrong but she knew to be silent.

A gelatinous film covered the leaves of the tangled growth, and the branches twisted like brown arms. Clusters of air-filled pods grew at intervals and kept the tall plants floating close to the surface. Elan found a small opening in a section so dense it was like a cave.

Her fear mounted—but she had little time to worry further, for Tia's cross-spoken voice was very near now.

If Elan continued cross-speaking they would be able to find her.

<How did you know I was here? Why did you come to meet me? Should I not have come? Has Thon threatened you?> The first thing Elan saw was the moonlight reflecting in the warm eye of Tia's Nemu. Tia quickly released his dorsal and came to her. The Nemu nodded a greeting before he went beyond the grotto to guard their safety.

"You are in grave danger, my child." Tia took both Elan's hands in her own. "There is a rumor afloat that a Merra will compete in the Choosing—"

"Who? A Merra?" Elan interrupted.

"It may have been a false rumor started to scare away any of us foolish enough to dream of it." Tia had not yet said what really troubled her.

"Why would anyone start such a rumor?" Elan asked.

"To have an excuse to send Kagor on a hunt for Merra." Tia's voice was barely controlled. A new terror gripped Elan. She had seen him. It had not been her imagination; he had been there, hunting for her.

"Tia, I saw him," Elan said. Tia grew deathly still next to her. It took some time until she could speak again.

"When the first talk of the Choosing began, there were already rumblings about the Ghrismogs being unable to Between. Perhaps you have not heard. You were isolated even when you lived among them in the Caverns, but many fear for the Seadragons. No eggs in as many centuries as the Mogs have been in power speaks the truth more eloquently than any promises made by Elders. Who knows which of them fears the Merra most, but Kagor is hunting, and I feared he would find you."

"But what Merra would dare? I don't understand."

"I heard your cross-spoken messages, not clearly, but I knew the turn of them. I wanted to come to you, but all Merra in the Caverns are being watched, my Nemu as well."

"So you were trying to speak with me?" Elan remembered what she thought had been her dreams.

"Several times, but all of your senses were filled with the garden. I can understand why, but it made you unreceptive." Tia turned to face the darkness, trying to sense danger.

"I knew you would come tonight, and I was able to send out other Merra to throw Kagor off."

Elan started. "Others have risked their lives for me?" She could not imagine the courage it would take to face Kagor purposefully.

"I told just a trusted few that the garden exists." Tia placed her hand upon Elan's woven basket as if to pay homage to the whole of the garden. "When they knew you were carrying samples, and how dangerous your discovery would be to what lay hidden, they volunteered."

Though fear was her overriding emotion, Elan felt surprised and proud. There were Merra who were courageous. She reached for her basket, but Tia stopped her.

"You will have to take it with you. We have no more time and they will watch me too closely, so sadly I may not keep them. Go to the Squid. He will be the better teacher, and he will know these plants." Tia held the basket nearer her face, and the smells brought a bitter-sweet expression to her features. She recognized something and brightened. "You have brought one that is spice sweet and a red brown color?"

"Yes," Elan answered anxiously.

"If you haven't brought enough, you may want to stop at the garden for more. It is shark bane, and though it would not work upon Kagor's beasts, it may help to protect you on your journey to the Squid." Tia reluctantly let the basket go and held Elan's hands again. "When Nemu has taken me back, I will send him to take you the rest of the way to the Squid's lair."

"But what if you need him in the Caverns?" Elan wanted to feel as courageous as the Merra who swam in the night, drawing off Kagor, or as brave as the one they said would compete.

"I will be all right. It will nearly be light when we get back, and assuredly we will be watched. Nemu was able to find a nearly forgotten passageway, and it brought us out near the ruined Merra city. It was by that route we slipped away, but darkness is needed for cover. It may not be until tomorrow night that he can join you again. Perhaps you should wait."

"I will stop for the bane, but I do not want to imperil the other Merra longer, for me." Thinking of them filled Elan with a sense of urgency. "If you insist that Nemu come, I will be more than grateful for his companionship and protection. I will travel northwest tomorrow from the garden, and then take shelter in the night. If he

will come, I will find him. We can finish our journey together."

Tia reluctantly nodded her agreement. "May the Balance bless and keep you," she said, and kissed Elan. Tia had always been formal with her, and Elan felt a new warmth at this affection. It made her feel happy in the midst of all her danger.

"Thank you, Tia," Elan said. "I will practice cross-speaking again, and this time I'll get it right." Tia smiled, but Elan sensed that her thoughts had turned to the threat of Kagor and the mystery of his hunting.

"Just let me know when you are safely there," Tia said.

Elan answered, "I will," then a frightening thought came to her. "Tia? How, when I send my voice across the sea, do I know that Kagor does not hear it as well?"

Tia heard the tremors in her voice and placed her hands around Elan's face. "I do not mean to frighten you, but Kagor's powers are such that we know not if he hears us. The best you can do is to make an image in your mind of those you want your voice to find. Let no likeness of Kagor come there." Both turned at the cross-spoken approach of the Nemu. Perhaps in his own manner of tongue telling, he knew their time together was at its end, and he waited to take Tia back to the Caverns. After one last squeeze of Elan's hand, Tia reached for the Nemu's dorsal. Elan watched their departure, and in the darkness, they were soon invisible. <Take all care,> Tia said from far away.

Elan knew she was racing the coming dawn, and she wanted to be in the garden for the shark bane and on her way by light. With a brief glance in the direction Tia and her Nemu had disappeared, she started back the way she had come.

With Kagor hunting, Elan would have to take every precaution. She swam as quickly as she safely could, trying to empty her mind. She kept fears and thoughts of the future at bay and imagined her mind as still as the pool inside the garden. Just as the droplet made concentric circles as it fell upon this pool, so would any indication of danger make itself known to her.

Somehow, time and distance faded, and Elan had an awareness that she was nearing the point at the outer reef where she had to head into the open sea toward the

garden. This she did with little thought, simply staying alert to the presence of Kagor or other predators.

At one point Elan was startled by the distant sounds of cross-spoken voices. The voices were not from Tia or her Nemu. Could they be the Merra sent out to decoy Kagor? Elan marveled at their courage as she listened. They cross-spoke openly, not privately. They talked of Seadragons and eggs, and once they thought they saw a shadow, but it passed. What a strange comfort the Merra voices were to her. She longed to speak with them. Was it dangerous? Could Kagor hear the cross-spoken voice? Elan pictured these Merra looking something like she did, and imagined the darkness of the sea that surrounded them. She cross-spoke to them, careful to keep her voice contained.

<Thank you for your protection, Merra.> She dared say no more, and didn't know if they had really heard her, for there was only silence.

11

To the Lair of the Squid



Elan was aware of the faintest hint of dawn as she swam into the crevice that led to the garden. She had seen no one, nor had she sensed danger again the rest of the passage. But as long as she was exposed on her journey from the garden to the Squid, she knew the other Merramaids would be out to draw off Kagor. The thought of anyone facing such terror for her was unbearable. She hurried up the passages, moved the stone, and made straight for the plant she now knew was shark bane.

She only hesitated over one other task. She removed Tooki from the basket to see if he would flee from her again. Despite her needs, he should have some choice in his destiny. He watched her from a safe distance and seemed puzzled. They were both motionless for a short time, then Elan started for the entrance hole again. When she looked, the turtle followed her, but he seemed reluctant to approach. Elan didn't know what to do, for she had reached the stone and Tooki would come no nearer. But opening her basket seemed to be the right invitation because Tooki swam toward it and got inside.

Elan pushed the baskets out before her and squeezed through the opening, carefully replacing the stone again. The passageway, even in the dark, was now familiar, and she peered past the sea fans into the quietness beyond.

She sensed nothing. The fear that had consumed her in the night was difficult to remember as dawn approached. She shot from the cave mouth and into the open. With a flick of her tail, she began her quest.

The sea grew lighter, a brilliant blue green, and Elan was excited that at her journey's end would be the Squid. There was much she had to learn. This was now her

single purpose in life, and a good one too, she thought, especially when she remembered how it had been for her just a short time before. She had had no thoughts of purpose or quest, only work. Now the future would be as she made it. Why then, could she not dispel this empty feeling? Elan felt the pull at her shoulder where the weight of the plants and Tooki dragged. She glanced at the turtle briefly and could see just an eye peering out from amid his bed of leaves.

<Wait until you get a look at the Squid,> Elan said, and she couldn't help imagining the two creatures studying each other. Tooki was going to need some reassuring.

Now that she had put a good distance between herself and the Caverns, Elan began to relax slightly. She knew Kagor could cover vast areas in his hunting, and she hoped she would be able to sense him in the broad reaches of the open sea before he knew of her. There was, however, little comfort in this hope. She had a dreaded certainty that his dark powers reached beyond normal. Should he catch some scent of her, she would not be able to outswim his blues for long. She made it a point, nonetheless, to watch for sheltered places as she swam. Storms could whip up suddenly, and there was the ever-present threat of sharks—equally dangerous though they hunted without masters to control them. Elan felt for the knife at her waist and hoped she would not have to draw it.

In the light of this new day, Elan let her fears slip away. She hoped the Nemu would stay with Tia. He could be of more use there, and after all, this journey would last just another half day past the next dawn, and she had no fatigue. She would find her shelter early, sleep well in her sleepnet, and reach the Squid's lair safely. The water in this section of sea was full of cold currents, and most sharks preferred warm water. As her thoughts of sharks drifted off, she returned to pondering Kagor, the greater danger.

Kagor had probably been hired by one of the wealthier and more determined Mog families, intent upon limiting the competition that a daughter might face. Were any Merra foolish enough to dream of becoming Between, Kagor's powers of persuasion would keep the competition free from a Merra's perceived threat. Elan wondered why they went to the trouble when custom alone was

sufficient to disallow Merra from the competition. She started as she saw something in the distance, wondering why she hadn't sensed danger, until she recognized what she saw.

Two dolphins, the rest of the school somewhere else, began the ritualized patterns that were the entranced prelude to lovemaking. It was a series of movements commonly called "the dance," sometimes called the "Merra dance" because it was thought that the Merra of long ago had also been swept into the same ritual. Elan had never seen it herself, though a section of the garden had depicted many of the erotic movements and patterns. These she had studied curiously, and sadly, certain she would never share in them.

With the exception of what she had felt riding the Nemu, Elan had never known the stirring to do the dance, and now probably never would. She would have a life of solitude.

Watching the dolphins, Elan recognized some of the same patterns she had seen in the garden. The two Nemu swam toward each other, gently caressing as they slid past one another and turned. Even from this distance Elan could see them trembling as they began another pass. The dolphins swam upright in the water and slowly revolved, letting the softest sections of their underbellies touch. She heard murmured sounds of their pleasure and saw an urgency building in their coming together. The Nemu, oblivious to all else, were being carried away on an ocean current, and on the current of their own creation. Elan felt a surge of warmth in her own womb, a replaying of her "almost dance" with the powerful Nemu, and though it was pleasurable even in memory, it only served to draw attention to her loneliness.

She started out on her journey again, glad for the moment of rest and distraction. She swam without stopping until the sun went beyond its highest point and she began to recognize some of the rock formations from her first trip here. The seascape, as she remembered it had, was beginning to become slightly more rocky. This was good because it offered more chance of shelter, but held risks as well. Here she might have less warning of a predator's attack, and she would have to increase her watchfulness.

The drag of the bags through the water was more

cumbersome than she had anticipated and was beginning to make her tired. She reached in for Tooki, not altogether sure he wouldn't try to bite her, and took some of the shark bane. There was much for her to learn. She ate some of the delicious leaf and wondered how it might help keep sharks away. Its smell reminded her of a childhood memory. In the Center Place, there had been caves where netters cut the skin away from the sharks they had killed. Sharkskin was used to polish some of the softer stones. Sometimes the netters would keep the shark flesh too long, and when it rotted, it had a smell that was vaguely like this shark bane, though much less pleasant.

Elan felt an ache in her lower back from the whole day and night spent swimming. She looked up past the surface of the sea and knew from the angle of the sun that she would soon need shelter. Her fatigue would increase the hazards, so she kept her eyes open for a cave or overhang that would offer the most protection.

Several she passed were almost right, some not deep enough, others too narrow for her to slip beneath. Her attention was focused more upon her need than upon her immediate safety, and she attributed the first tingling along her spine to a change in temperature. She had passed into a sudden warm current and this pleased her. A safe overhang in warmer waters would be ideal. She had forgotten that warm water was the preference of sharks as well, and by the time she was struck by her second instinctual warning, it was too powerful to attribute to anything but predator.

Elan looked around in each direction, but saw nothing. She quickly sought in her memory for the last low overhang and remembered one not too far back. She had just turned to find it when she saw the blade cutting through the water at angles. It was a shark. She had no time to identify which kind because by its speed, she gauged it was hunting food, and would circle her, then with lightning velocity, close in to kill her.

She sped back toward the low rock shelter feeling terribly slowed by the bags. She carried bane, but how was it used? She had no time to wonder as she glanced back to find the shark. It was nowhere to be seen. Did it still hunt her?

She could not see the overhang either, and she shuddered, feeling the danger grow nearer. She looked up

and saw the young white shark circling more closely. Twice Elan's size and fast, it was even more vicious than the blue. Elan knew her life would be over in moments if she did not find that ledge. She could feel her panic choke her as she raced from one low rock to the next. There was no shelter from the killer white.

The next cluster of rocks was a short distance away, and just as Elan started for them, a shadow, long and ominous, shot over her. She looked up and froze, the beast just a tail's length above her. It went a short distance past her and turned back. Elan forced herself into an explosion of speed; the water around her became a froth of bubbles as she raced for the next rock cluster.

Darkness closed in as she frantically circled the low rocks. Still, she found no place to squeeze herself. She knew the shark was upon her and looked back to see its eyes focused down on her, its jagged teeth not an arm's length away. She tried to dodge its thrust but was butted by its snout, the blow landing on her shoulder. The thorny skin opened a wound, and her blood clouded the water. The shark moved by her to make another turn. This next pass would be the last. Elan forced her eyes from the killer long enough to glance down. It was there, the narrowest of overhangs, directly over the sandy bottom. She raced for it. She could feel the shark upon her as she slid into the space, just a finger deeper than she was. The stone exploded behind her as she drew in the tip of her tail. She had just enough room to turn in, and realized in horror what the shark could have done to her. Its jaws gaped wide and bit into the rock ledge beyond her face. The shark tore at the overhang in a rage of frustration, its body thrashing.

Elan was rigid with fear as she watched the white attack the ledge again, ripping it savagely. There was a roar of confusion and through it Elan could hear the grinding of its teeth against the stone. Pieces of plant and barnacles, rock and teeth rained past her face to the bottom. The frenzied thrashing of its tail whipped up the bottom sand until the water was white and churning.

The shark tried to reach her beneath the ledge, but he was thicker than Elan and simply smashed his head. For a moment he seemed to lose interest, then resumed his attack on the overhang. Elan felt no easing in her fear until she was certain the ledge would not crumble away.

It was only then that she pulled shark bane from her basket, and not knowing what else to do, she rubbed the leaves against the stones above her head until they disappeared into a pulp. She could smell it, and she wondered if the shark was still too frenzied to smell it as well. He broke away more teeth and rock, then abruptly turned and disappeared into the opaque whiteness. Elan could not trust that he had actually given up his quarry, and as well as she could she unraveled her sleepnet. This would be her shelter for the night, and she hoped that by morning, the white—if it was still around—would grow tired of waiting for her.

The water cleared somewhat as the sand and mud settled back to the bottom. Once, as if it were a cloud passing between her and the setting sun, Elan thought she saw the shadow of the shark pass above. It was at this moment that she remembered she had not thought of eels, but certainly she would have felt the dull pain of their jaws had she been sharing this overhang with any of them.

She reached into her bag for Tooki and laid her hand over his shell. After a life with nothing more to worry about than which juicy leaf to eat, this, no matter how little he knew of it, must have been terrifying. But the small turtle was as quiet as death, and she wondered if the fear might have killed him. She felt relieved as he shifted his position, and she withdrew him from the basket.

"We'll be safe here, my little friend," Elan assured him, peering into the murky water. She could just make out the form of another fish beneath the ledge with them. It was a gamby, and when it swam out with several other smaller fish Elan had not seen, she knew the white shark had probably gone. She was going nowhere, feeling frail with her remembered fear. So much for her longed-for courage.

A song she had learned as a child came back to her. It was a silly song about a shark, but she knew she needed comforting as much as Tooki did. She tried to remember the words, and as she sang in the gloom beneath her overhang, her voice was at first weak, then grew stronger. All the while she kept her hands around the turtle, stroking the soft scales of his head.

A shark went ahunting,
For dinner, ahunting,

And roared with a menace,
Beware of the Sea King,
The killer, the Sea King.
But lo came an odd fish
When all else were hiding,
And quaking and hiding,
To follow the big shark,
Behind him agliding,
So silent, agliding.
What fool! barked the shark
As he turned round to bite him,
To eat him to bite him,
But reach him he could not.
The shark grew then more grim,
And angry and more grim.
The odd fish was tireless,
Behind him achasing,
And spinning and chasing.
The shark could not catch it,
This thing was outpacing,
Outracing, outpacing,
And the shark lost his mind.
He was not used to failing,
To quitting to failing,
But the odd fish was no fish,
His own tail he was tailing,
And trailing, and tailing.
At last he bit down,
It bit back, oh the stinging!
Oh the gall, oh the stinging!
And off in the distance,
His voice came back ringing,
And singing, and ringing,
That a shark went ahunting,
For dinner, ahunting.

The song followed its own tail as the shark did, and Elan remembered hearing other children singing it for whole afternoons, until they were told to be silent.

Tooki stirred and she let him swim free. He explored their hole for the night, and Elan was frightened for a moment that he might leave their shelter. But he came back to her when she brought food from her bag, and after eating small pieces he got back into his woven

traveling home of his own volition. Elan was hungry herself and was glad for the provisions she had brought. She found small holes in some of the fruit pieces where Tooki had helped himself on the long journey.

She was as safe as she could be beneath this ledge, and because she could finally relax her vigilance, she fell asleep before the last traces of shark bane on the current had disappeared. She heard no soothing voices that night. Her dreams were of Kagor, stalking her to the very edges of the sea.

She awoke at dawn. As she slipped from her sleepnet she was aware of her name, called in cross-speak from a great distance. It was Tia's Nemu.

<Elan a song sing, for this Nemu to follow,> he said. Without deciding which song, she sang the last one in her mind, about the shark who chased his tail. By the time she had sung it three times, she spotted the Nemu coming toward her at tremendous speed. He went to the surface for a last leap before he came down to her.

<Nemu happy far swimming, even if reason for danger is,> he said. Though he seemed pleased or amused by her choice of songs, she noticed that part of him stayed alert to distant warnings.

<You were in danger coming here?> Elan wasn't certain what he meant.

<More than Kagor hunt. Another hunter, and sharks this Nemu followed. This Nemu for them too fast is swimming.> The Nemu took his eyes from her periodically to search the far sea. Elan was more confused than ever; this news made her afraid and glad for the Nemu's company.

She studied him. <Why are they sending the hunters? Can it be just to frighten the Merra? I don't understand.>

<Tia say, for Between a Merra they afraid will compete.> The Nemu looked at Elan.

<Who would dare? What Merra would have such courage?> Perhaps one of the maids who had gone out in the black night to draw off Kagor from her scent? Though it was true she dreamed of being Between, she knew better than to think it could ever be. Even after all she had seen in the garden, she knew everything was different now. Ghrismogs chose Betweens to suit themselves, and all a

Merra maid would win for her trouble was the jaws of Kagor's blues.

She looked at the Nemu again. Was there something he was leaving unsaid? <You should have stayed in the Caverns. It was too dangerous for you to make this journey, Nemu. What if you had met Kagor, or the other hunters you spoke of? They would be just as happy to have you for a trophy.>

<Follow Nemu they did, or Nemu here sooner would be. Far had to go, them to lose,> Nemu said. Elan felt a shadow of fear pass through her once again. Were they so determined? So vigilant to be able to hunt a solitary Nemu? What was happening? There was some mystery on the current, some encroaching darkness. She couldn't help but notice the Nemu staring at her shoulder where the shark had torn the skin. It was becoming red with infection, and painful.

<Unfortunately, I am not as swift as the Nemu, though I still managed to rob him of a meal,> she said.

<A wise decision,> Nemu said. Elan noticed how accustomed she was becoming to cross-speaking. She swam once again beneath her ledge and rolled her sleepnet, then slipped it into her woven bag.

<The Squid far is?> the Nemu asked.

<Half the day's swim,> she said. <I will be happy for your company.> She was surprised when the Nemu swam beneath her for her to ride. <I can swim, you have had too far and fast to come. You must be tired,> she said, but the Nemu did not move.

<This Nemu not tired is, more important for you in shelter of Squid safe be. In the open sea, danger is.> Elan gratefully took hold of his dorsal. Her whole body ached from her panicked race with the white shark, and her shoulder was deeply bruised.

<Nemu happy will be if no sharks or hunters we see,> he said as they picked up speed. With two of them to stay alert, Elan relaxed slightly and looked around them. She was reminded of how natural this closeness to the Nemu felt, as if this was the way it should always have been. She hummed another song, to which she knew no words. Were there Merras somewhere in the sea who might remember them? Was it all gone? If she learned the songs from the Squid, would they disappear when she did?

Memories and flesh, nothing more than froth on the tips of waves.

The journey went quickly, riding the Nemu. He was quiet, but good company. Elan recognized the rock formations as they drew near. When she and her companions approached the area she thought was home to the Squid, Elan heard the unspoken amazement from the Nemu, normally too reserved to express surprise. There above his lair hung the Squid, awaiting them.

<Do you think he is as old as the Seadragons?> Elan asked.

<The part of this Squid, which not flesh is, as old as the shells in mountain peaks,> the Nemu answered softly. They were drawing too near the Squid for her to question further. Tooki struggled to be let out and Elan knew the small turtle would have to see his new home and host eventually. As they came to a stop near the Squid, she let Tooki from his traveling home. Instead of fleeing, as she might have expected, he looked at the Squid, shuddered a moment, then swam back and forth between Elan and the Squid, as if to protect her from this monster. The turtle made small snapping gestures toward the Squid, all the while checking on Elan. His antics captured their attention until the Squid spoke.

<A pitiful guard, I'm afraid, but a loyal friend, young Merra. Unusual behavior for a turtle of any size.>

Elan smiled, less afraid of the Squid than she thought she would be, and most happy to see him again. <Squid, this Nemu is my friend, and has faced dangers to accompany me here.> Letting go of the Nemu's dorsal, she realized how sore she was, unaccustomed to distance swimming.

<We will have good companions, then. A nice change for this Squid.>

<Nemu not stay can,> the Nemu said. Elan couldn't help but notice the tone of reverence the dolphin used with the Squid. <Nemu to Caverns return will, later, if safe, news of Choosing bring.> Elan wasn't certain but she thought she saw the Squid start at the word "Choosing," his color showing agitation.

<Choosing?> he asked. <A Choosing approaches?> There was alarm in his voice, which caused the turtle to draw back momentarily.

<In less than two moons,> the Nemu answered.

The Squid shut his giant blue eyes and seemed to look inward.

<I should have known.> He leveled his gaze at Elan. <I should have known that in the Balance there was some plan. A Merra would not come swimming past my rock without purpose.>

<I was looking for effron, remember?> Elan reminded him, a little frightened by his words.

<And now?> the Squid asked.

<I was hoping I could stay with you,> she began, feeling less comfortable. <Things have changed since I saw you last, and—and I have many questions to ask you.> The Squid turned his attention to the Nemu.

<Danger for Merra reawakened has, as of old times. There rumors are, that a Merra compete will,> the Nemu explained.

<Rumors?> the Squid asked.

<Rumors, fear, and hunters,> the Nemu went on.

The Squid looked out into the open sea, and Elan got the feeling his eye could see things invisible to others. <The hunters seek a Merra then?> he asked. Elan had an odd sensation that the Squid and the Nemu were having a conversation apart from the one she heard. She filled the uncomfortable silence with too many words.

<There were other rumors in the Caverns, Tia told me, remember Nemu? You were there. Some say the darkness encroaches, and the Seadragons have not lain eggs because the Ghrismaids do not know how to Between.> They waited for her to go on. <I found a garden, the Nemu knows about it, and in it were pictures, and I found that what I had always heard were lies. Merras did Between, a long time ago. The Ghrismogs fight among themselves to get their daughters an opportunity to compete in the Choosing. No Merra can compete. They would sooner have a flounder be companion to the Seadragons.> Though Elan had had this argument with herself many times in the garden, it sounded hollow when spoken to others. And she could not escape the feeling that the Squid and the Nemu were sharing some secret.

The Squid gestured to the basket she carried. As his tentacle came near, the turtle advanced as far as he dared, then fell back. Elan tried to reassure Tooki.

<From the garden?> the Squid asked. When Elan nod-

ded, he instructed her to take from it a long yellow leaf, thick and waxy looking. She broke it as she was told, and rubbed the clear sappy fluid into the wound on her shoulder. It tingled, and she knew this would somehow help heal the infection. In the Caverns the healers could do little to save an arm if the infection became too fierce. Elan had never seen them use a leaf such as this one. She was aware of a silence. The Squid had looked inward again; Elan and the Nemu waited for him to speak.

<Will the Nemu accompany us for a short swim?> the Squid asked, opening his pale blue eyes slowly. <If he is not weary.>

<Nemu not tired,> the dolphin said.

<I have stayed in my lair many days, and my legs could do with a good stretching.> The Squid let several of his massive legs drift upward for effect. This was entirely too much for Tooki, and the small turtle spun and frantically paddled toward Elan. She opened her bag in time for him to disappear inside.

Elan still had the oddest sensation that there was some other context to this moment, but she thought perhaps it might be her own fatigue. She saw that the Squid was waiting for her to speak. Though she felt tired, she knew they wanted her to accompany them.

<I have rested, riding the Nemu,> she said, and she started in the direction the Squid was drifting. When he started swimming in earnest, Elan remembered the odd rhythm she had to maintain, a burst of speed, followed by a slow glide. She noticed that the Nemu kept up a steady pace along side of them.

<You must tell me later of the garden and of the changes that have brought you here,> the Squid said. Aside from all there was to learn, Elan didn't want to confess one of her main reasons for coming: she didn't want to be in the Caverns to see someone else made Between.

They swam along the ridge that separated the deep water from the higher, warmer plains. Elan noticed a distinct calming of her fears with Nemu and the giant Squid on either side of her. Not even Kagor and his blues would meet these foes happily.

She was beginning to feel that this swim had an air of purpose about it, something more than the stretch the

Squid requested. Her thoughts were interrupted by the Squid.

<So this garden you found had pictures in it?> he asked.

<Many,> Elan answered. <A beautiful mosaic of the Seadragons, and many of the plants there were depicted.> She frowned as she remembered some of the more mysterious ones. <There was one where a Merra hovered beneath a huge school of fish.>

<That would be the first test of the Choosing,> the Squid explained.

Elan felt a new burst of energy at the prospect of actually having the garden's mysteries revealed. <What was she doing?> she asked, losing her rhythm as the Squid shot ahead of her powerfully. She soon caught up and was gliding alongside once again.

<What she was doing, and what the maids in the Choosing still do, if the Ghrismogs have not further altered this ritual, is called patterning.>

<Patterning?> Elan asked.

<An exercise in cross-speaking, done with lightfish,> the Squid went on.

<She cross-speaks to all the fish at once?> Elan tried to imagine what control it would take.

<All at once, and when the Merra is powerful, she can shape the school into whatever pattern she imagines. I saw another Merra do it once, a vision I will never forget. It was as if she commanded the stars and moon to dance around her and all living things were spellbound in the face of such magnificence.>

<You saw a Merra, in a Choosing? How long ago?>

<A very long time ago. The Merra's name was Aaslan.> The Squid and the Nemu exchanged a glance, and Elan wanted to ask the Squid about it later, for the memory seemed to touch some old sorrow in him. They were silent for some time as they swam into a strange section of the sea. The soreness in Elan's muscles subsided as she forced them to move again. They had already come a great distance from the Squid's lair. Beneath them low mounds of black rock crawled across the seafloor, and here and there bubbles rose from fissures. Had she not been accompanied by the Nemu and Squid, Elan would have avoided this place.

<How did it happen?> she asked. <Why are there no more Merra Betweens?>

<Because the Ghrismogs were jealous of the Merra's power over the Seadragons, and therefore over the Balance, and they wanted this power for themselves.> The Squid's cross-speak voice remained level. <Little by little the Mogs began to erase all that was Merra. There were small manipulations at first, almost unnoticed. Then they became more audacious and the few who spoke out, Mog or Merra, disappeared, lost to the hunters, no doubt.>

<I don't understand how all I saw in the garden could have been lost,> Elan said.

<It took centuries, and avarice is too ugly in its pure form, so it always comes in some other guise—the innocent branded threatening, those who disagree silenced “for the good of the Caverns,” all the ceremonies that were important to the Merra, the moon days, were made “more important” by making them Mog days of worship. Slowly the new face obliterated the old. Greed is a great force. Soon all things Merra were called evil and disappeared. Now Betweens are chosen by Mogs, and every living creature suffers for it.>

The red mottling across the Squid turned purple with old angers awakening. Elan waited for him to calm somewhat. They swam hard; she pushed herself to keep up with the Squid and Nemu, wondering where they were going and how long they would travel. It would surely be dark by the time they returned to the lair. She remembered that the Squid gave off his own light, and the thought, though strange, was comforting. Elan looked at him and saw that his color was near normal. She had so many questions.

<I was caught singing once, and brought before a Dispenser, one who decides complaints in the Caverns,> she began. <He told me of the travesty, of the Merra's inability to defend themselves against evil. Even their inability to survive. When they were so gifted, in arts, and healing and justice, how can they have been so flawed? How can they have let this darkness come about?>

They swam for some time, and Elan saw the Squid's eye look first inward, then clearly at her. He studied her until she was most uncomfortable; she was grateful she could lose herself somewhat in their movement.

<One of the first things you must learn, Elan, is to beware from whom you learn your history. Each will tell a history that colors him best. A Mog—and he need not

be clever, only to have some disgrace to hide, or some gain to wish himself—tells first a lie, and soon after, that same lie is told as history. Indisputable and hallowed. There is goodness in some Mogs, small parts to be certain, but when they stole the Merras' ways from them, even the worst of them needed a story that would lay a balm of words over the guilt. We have a story, in the travesty, that is told to you by Ghrismogs. In this story, the Ghrismogs' greed plays but one small part, and the Merras' weakness the rest. Let it be said, that yes, the Olaki did come, and yes, the tragedy was real, but even then, many long winters ago, the Ghrismogs wanted the Caverns. There was treachery, there were lies told the Merra High Elder by her Ghrismog emissaries sent to the Caverns of the Olaki. It was the Ghrismogs' greed that had them ready to sacrifice all. To have the Caverns, and control of the Dragons, was worth any price to them. It was the Ghrismogs who underestimated the ferocity of the Olaki. They paid dearly themselves. But not so dear as the Merra. When all is done, you must look in your own heart to know the truth. It lies at some middle depth, half-truths above, half-truths below. Even my truth, what I tell you now, is colored to fit my vision. Find your own truths as best you can, only remember that few are courageous enough to tell a tale of which they are not the hero.>

Elan swam a long distance in silence. Her thoughts struggled like netted fish. How much of what she had learned the whole of her life had been a lie? The more she allowed herself to believe the Squid, the more she felt the burden of her Merra guilt drift off. It was like sunlight, shining into a dark crevice. Though these new truths could be used to dispel her doubts, they did little to change what was, in the sea. There would still be a Choosing, during which a Ghrismaid would be made Between.

The seascape about them changed. The water grew deeper as the seafloor fell, and instead of swimming in the warmer water near the surface, they stayed low, just ten tails above the sand and rock beneath them. The Nemu was silent, looking ahead as if he too was measuring the Squid's truth against all he knew. Elan was hungry for everything she could learn.

<My foster brothers said something about killer whales. What part have they in the testing?>

The Squid grew grim. <The killers have become the second test of the Choosing. They were never part of the test for Between when the Merras competed. The Ghrismogs added this battle centuries ago. It satisfies their blood lust while they pretend it serves a useful purpose in testing a maid's courage.>

<What? What is it?> She still had no understanding, having been kept away from any knowledge by the Ghrismogs. When the Squid explained about the territorial battle incited between the killer whales, Elan was repelled by the cruelty of it. <What can a maid do to stop it?> she asked, awed by the courage it must take.

<As I said, there have been no Merras tried, some Merramogs I have heard. I don't know, I have stopped attending the Choosings since Aaslan was—since Aaslan. They are a mockery of what they were. My guess is that during this battle between the giants, the maid must do whatever she can to stop it. The killers as a rule are less dominated by blood lust than the Ghrismogs, and since the beginning they have developed a ritualistic pattern of behavior that spares them the desire to kill.> The Squid's eye fell upon Elan, her brow still furrowed. <The fights can sometimes be calmed by cross-speaking, perhaps a song. It is difficult to reach them through anger.>

<But if only Mogs or Merramogs compete, how do they learn the songs? How do they learn cross-speaking?> Elan had a sudden sense of confusion. She didn't like sharing her newfound secrets with the Ghrismogs.

The Squid patiently answered. <The songs can be taught, cross-speaking too. Merras are most adept at these arts, because they are truer of heart and have little malice in them. The Ghrismogs only find their own voices beautiful because they have forgotten what the Merra sound like. If they were to hear another Merra voice, perhaps old memories would awaken in them too, and they would know what they had done. But I doubt it.> Elan was so intent upon his answers that she forgot the strangeness of this journey.

<If the Mogs allow Merra songs and cross-speaking in the Choosing, why are they forbidden at all other times?> she asked. As they swam she saw a huge carcass of wood below them, left in the deep from some split-tail voyage.

<Perhaps fear. Too many reminders of the past could bring disastrous attention to what they lack in the present. But they could not change everything. If they could have found some other way to care for the Seadragons, they would have. But they are forced to imitate the Merra ways, even if the Mogs are only shadows of what the Merra were at their art.>

<So the Betweens sing to the Seadragons, and care for them?> Elan remembered the mosaic in the garden.

<Yes, many of the things you saw in the garden were used in the care of the Seadragons. The small part of the Between's duties is the physical care of the Seadragons, keeping them free of parasites, their skin and scales oiled, their horns from splitting—but the real importance of what the Between does begins with the songs. You mentioned them before. You, and all Merras, have a vestigial memory of your past. Much of what the Merras did, and what the Between did for the Seadragons, was a gift that could not be seen.> The Squid signaled the Nemu and went on.

<Because of their part in the Balance, the Seadragons suffer from a weariness of spirit. All that is good in the Balance depends on them, and it is a sorrowful burden. Singing makes them forget.>

<That's why their eyes always look so sad in the paintings?> Elan asked.

<Tormented even, but they are not always so, or at least they weren't when the Merra Betweens sang to them.>

<You have seen them?> Elan was excited.

<Certainly, I saw them at Aaslan's Choosing.> The Squid could tell from Elan's expression that she had no knowledge at all of the Choosings. <The new Between, after the Choosing, meets the Seadragons for the first time in the Center Place. The old Between takes her charges to the ceremony, and the new Between begins her duties at that moment. This ritual, though, is nothing next to seeing the Seadragons in the open sea.>

<You have seen them in the open sea?> Elan's eyes were wide as she tried to imagine such a miracle.

<Yes, twice in the last century. They are beyond your dreams, and around them one feels the immensity of their burden. Their magnificence comes not from their size but from their courage.>

Elan longed to see them. All of this she was hearing for the first time only gave meaning to the reverence she had always felt, and it made her ache keener. Once this blessing had been the Merras', and it had been taken away. The Seadragons suffered most of all.

<Do you know where the word "Between" comes from?> the Squid asked. Elan was surprised she had never wondered. <A maid is called Between,> he explained, <because she comes between the Seadragons and their burdens.>

The Squid and the Nemu were silent as they swam. Elan didn't notice how cold the water they were entering had become, or the ominous formations of rock and weed below. Her only thought was of the Seadragons, and it consumed her. They had no one left to sing to them. There was no Between for them; they were left alone through all time with their sorrows and the weight of growing darkness. Thinking of them, Elan had never felt such anguish, not when her true parents died, not when Maadu died. She felt as if she were dying herself, as if all that was light and magical in the sea were being enveloped in shadow. Elan wasn't aware that the Squid had stopped with the Nemu. Like a pinprick through her miserable thoughts she heard a faint calling. They were the voices, sorrowful, entreating. They grew louder and seemed to be coming from nearby, closer than she had ever heard them before. There was something different in them, but she could not hear what it was. Elan looked expectantly at the Squid and Nemu to see if they had heard the voices as well. They watched her. Did they look afraid? What strange expressions in their eyes.

"The voices!" Elan cried above the growing noise of them. "Don't you hear them? They're calling me—they need me." A wave of urgency swept through her, pulling her toward the calling. She shot forward toward the voices. "We have to go to them!"

She couldn't understand the Squid's calm, not when the crying out held such pitiful need, and grew so loud in her it forced out her senses. She followed the voices as they commanded, with the Squid above her and the Nemu nearby. She swam around a strange formation of rocks, familiar and haunting, then drew closer and saw a hole. That was where the voices came from! She knew she had

seen the hole somewhere before, long ago. Where was it?

"I have to go to them." Elan looked at the Squid and the Nemu, aware of little but the torment the voices brought her. The Squid reached out to her as she shot down into the hole. Elan felt she was suffocating, she was being pulled down. She sensed the darkness around her and the terror, but she couldn't stop herself. The voices were so sweet now, enticing her, needing her. When she felt the constricting around her lungs, she knew she was dying. Now she could go to them, and they would welcome her. The blackness of the hole pressed around her, and then the voices were silent.

Above, the Nemu was lost in the darkness, vaguely aware of the return of the Squid. The dolphin shot toward the opening of the hole, away from this abyss that was evil come together in the earth's wounds. He turned to see the Squid emerge, completely white, with Elan hanging limply in his arms. The Nemu felt a constricting in his own heart. Was she dead? How had he let her get away? She had shot into the black chasm faster than the Nemu had ever thought possible.

The Squid was shaken, but the Nemu saw that some color returned to him. In answer to the question the Nemu was afraid to ask, the Squid said, <She lives. She may be the one. You must tell them.> And the Nemu swam back toward the Caverns.

12

Training for Between



When Elan awoke she was back in the Squid's lair. The terrible pain in her lungs and the dark bruises on her ribs told her the nightmare she remembered was real. She floated in her sleepnet; Tooki, her guardian, was paddling back and forth across the entrance. She was suddenly afraid to be alone, but her fear subsided when she saw the Squid resting motionlessly in the crevice across from her. She felt tired. The Squid seemed to look at her differently. There was a warmth in his eye, almost sorrow.

<That was the hole. The third test of the Choosing,> he said.

Elan shuddered. <You pulled me back?> She looked down at her bruises.

<I nearly had to crush you to do it. I never intended you to be so endangered. I misjudged their desire to have you.>

<What terrible place is that?> Elan felt the stinging in her eyes and knew that were she in the dry air, there would be tears. The memory of it rushed over her with the full terror of her willing surrender to it. <I saw it in the garden first, the terrible painting. The fear I felt of it in the garden is nothing to the horror I know now.> She still felt numb from her eagerness to rush to her death.

<All that is evil lurks there,> the Squid cross-spoke softly. <The voices call down the innocent. It is said that only Merras hear them, but others may still feel the evil.>

Elan pressed her hands to her ears, trying to block the memory of the sound. <I was going to die—I think I even knew, but I couldn't stop myself.> She was horrified at her weakness.

<There was a myth, the purer the heart of the Merras,

the louder the voices call to her. The purer the heart, the greater their prize.> The Squid's voice enfolded her, trying to protect her from her fear.

<But what Merra could ever resist them? Am I so weak?>

<Not at all. At the Choosings it was different. Do you remember in the garden? Was there a picture of the Merra singing around the hole?> Elan remembered them, how fierce and determined they looked. She turned her eyes to the Squid. <Those Merra were calling the Between back. They made their own voices louder than the other voices, the ones calling Merra to their deaths.>

<But the voices were so loud!> Elan cried. <There could be no other sound.>

<There is more evil now.> A part of Elan fought against this hopelessness, but her real fear was in her confusion, in her sense of betrayal. She had always heard these voices. Had they truly been the voices of this evil place? Could they reach so far just for her?

<But I hear them always,> she cried, and pressed her hands to her ears again, though the sounds and memories came from within her. <I hear them every night before I dream!> She didn't notice the Squid turn luminous with interest.

<You hear them before you dream?> he asked anxiously. Elan was lost in her private sorrows, too pained to answer. <But are they the same, Elan? Are the voices the same?>

Elan heard him and thought. <Nearly the same. I never dreamed it was the darkness that beckoned me.> She rocked herself in her sleepnet.

<Tell me how the voices were different.> The sharpness in the Squid's voice forced Elan to think. She thought back to what seemed a long time ago. When she lived with Maadu, and in the garden. The voices were slightly different, but how?

<The voices I have always heard are softer, and to me they always sounded more sad. There was no darkness in them, as there was in the abyss.> She had another thought and felt the tightness in her lungs. She felt the pain freshly.

<Go ahead, say it,> the Squid said.

<My voices, the ones I've always heard, I was so certain that they—they loved me.> When Elan said this, she

knew. She knew the voices were different. The certainty with which she remembered this made her suddenly calm. The Squid had drifted into the cavern and hovered above her, his eyes strangely bright. <What is it?> she asked, slightly alarmed. <What does it mean that they loved me?>

<It means that all may not be lost.> There was a new softness in the Squid's tone, perhaps even something akin to awe. <It means that someone still hears.>

<What are you saying? What voices are they, then?> Elan asked.

<The voices you hear at night belong to the Seadragons. I have heard, though it was so long ago I thought it a wishful dream, that the true Between hears them from the day she is born.>

<The Seadragons? I hear them?> Elan grew very still. The Squid's color became warm and shimmering.

<You are the only one who hears them,> he said.

<But why do they call me? I don't know what they're saying.> Her fear gave way to wonder.

<You must call them back from the abyss. What you felt there? At the hole? The voices promise the same peace to the Seadragons. The same dark oblivion and rest from their sorrows. The Seadragons come nearer to this abyss. With each passing day, the shadow stretches out farther. When they enter that place, all will be lost.>

<I must call them back?> Elan knew.

<Your voice, they can hear,> the Squid said.

<I must sing to them then,> Elan said. <I must be their Between.> She looked at the Squid and was certain he had always known.

"Oh! This is ridiculous!" Kili screamed, flailing her arms. Thousands of small silverfish scattered in every direction. She watched in frustration as Dordre, a solidly built Merramog, folded her arms beneath her huge breasts and called the fish back in cross-speak. Slowly they returned, and as soon as she was surrounded by the silver cloud she held them in close and spoke with Kili at the same time. Her jaw jutted with determination.

"When you have two terrible killers screamin' toward each other in a rage, and you in the middle, you'll wish you'd paid more attention to your old teacher."

Kili swam behind the old Merramog and gave her

square shoulders an affectionate hug. "I know you're right, but I'm tired of practicing every day." She pouted.

"I know you are, my dear, but think about why, think about the honor of bein' Between, and it will be easier for you." Dordre patted the young maid's arm and Kili went back to her place in the middle of the vast unmanageable school.

"Now, do like I said. Picture them the way you want them. Every detail of the design. Coax them with pretty words in your head, pretty pictures. They feel it, they do." Dordre drifted back to observe. The school began to separate systematically and cluster in living, shimmering circles around Kili's outstretched arms. Kili lost her thought when she began thinking about how beautiful she must look with these fish like a living mantle around her, obeying her. But she heard an exasperated grunt from Dordre and knew they must be straying from the pattern.

"I said only fish in your head, only fish. Don't think about anythin' else or they'll leave you."

"I don't want to do any more today," Kili whined.

"Once more, go ahead, pull them back," Dordre insisted, and Kili reluctantly obeyed. She concentrated hard and forced the small fish back around her. Dordre watched the nervous bunching of the school.

"What are you picturin'? You circling them with barracuda again? I told you pretty thoughts, not threats, or they get skittish and they fade." Kili let the school go again and Dordre looked at her with serious criticism, shaking her finger at the errant maid. "This is no joke, and if you don't keep your mind to it, you'll make a fool of yourself and your uncle will make shark bait out o' me." The dark furrow between Dordre's eyebrows softened as Kili looked remorseful and took her teacher's broad hand in her own.

"Please don't be mad at me—we've been working so hard and I am doing well, you said I was."

Dordre could not help but be taken in. Kili's charm was powerful. She smiled and patted Kili's hand. "You have been working hard, and I am proud of you. But there is much for you to learn, and though I know you can win the Choosing, that isn't the important part of it."

"Then why are we doing all of this? If you think I'm going to win anyway? What could be more important?"

"You will be caring for the Seadragons, Kili. No matter what has become of this world, the Between's duties are more important than ever. Your task will be more difficult than any Between's before you. You must get them to lay. If you cannot, then who knows what will become of us? Being Between means more than wearing pearls and a cape. Everything will depend on how well you do your job."

"You make it sound positively frightful," Kili protested. "You mean I'll have no fun to look forward to?"

"Fun?" The Merramog hesitated. "Fun? No, I don't think it will be fun, child. It will be a lonely life, unless you love the Seadragons more than you love yourself."

"Being Between would be worth it, I suppose," Kili said, playing with her hair. "But you make it sound as if I should have as much fun as I can, while I have the chance."

"I do?" Dordre asked.

"Yes, you do. And I might study harder if I had some incentive." Kili smiled with all her charm at her teacher.

"And what is it you're wantin' now?" Dordre backed away slightly.

Kili pressed her face to the Merramog's hand. "Why don't you teach me that song?"

"What song?" Dordre wondered.

"The one you said turns a Mog's heart," Kili answered.

"Oh no." Dordre realized what Kili was after. "Not that one."

"Why not?" Kili hid her annoyance with a faked pout. "You want me to believe these silly songs actually work, don't you? What better way to give me confidence, and maybe some fun, before it's too late? It could help me be a better student." She watched Dordre's face for a sign.

"They work, and you know they do," Dordre reminded her.

"How do I know?" Kili persisted. "You only taught me the backward song, and I never get to practice on anything bigger than a grouper."

"And it worked very well on that grouper, it did. The backward song always does." Kili laughed at how foolish they had made the grouper look. Dordre laughed with her and the last of her resistance left her. She had little defense against the charm of the young Ghrismaid. "All right, all right, I'll teach you the heart song."

Kili squealed and kissed her teacher soundly on the cheek.

"But you have to make me a sacred promise." Dordre became serious again. "Promise me you won't use it until after you're Between—you're going to need all your concentration on this training." She looked squarely at Kili.

"Of course, I promise," Kili lied. Why should she wait until she was Between? When she was Between she could have anything she wanted, and she didn't want to wait that long for Menol. But all Dordre saw was the twinkle in the Ghrismaid's determined eyes.

Kili had to wait three days until she saw Menol leaving the Grand Chamber for his home. Each day she left Dordre hurriedly after they had practiced and rushed to the Center Place to watch for him. Meanwhile she practiced her song, the one that would make him love her even against his will. When she at last saw him, she kept herself hidden as she followed him through the passageways. When she saw where he lived, she marked it in her memory and left for her home, to wait for dark and to make herself more beautiful.

Once inside her room Kili hugged herself with anticipation. She selected the pearls she would wear and draped them through her black hair. She had the sweet oil of mollusks collected and sealed in a small shell. In it was ground mother-of-pearl, which left a glittering trace across the skin. Kili applied it to her neck and breasts. As she finished, it was growing dark and her family was busy in other areas of the living cave. As she left, she was careful that no one saw her.

Kili was warmed by the glances of the Mogs that she drew en route to Menol's living cave. She was glad she met no one she knew, for she wanted no delay.

She waited until she was just outside the mouth of his cave before she started humming the song. She felt no remorse in breaking her promise to Dordre. She had to see if it worked, didn't she? She began to sing it loudly enough for him to hear her. The dusk in the sky cast a faint light over the cave, but there was enough for her to see by, and she reveled in the surprise she saw in his face when he came out. Had the song worked? She couldn't wait to find out.

"Don't you know you can get into trouble singing Merra songs?" Menol asked her.

"Not if I'm practicing for the Choosing," Kili answered flippantly. She swayed gently in the water, knowing it made her hair float beautifully above her head.

"Why are you practicing here?" Menol asked.

"You don't have to be angry, I didn't know you lived near here," Kili lied. She knew that if she left, he might call her back and he might not. She sang a few lines of the song, looking sorrowful and glancing everywhere but directly at him. She started to leave. "I have to leave anyway," she said. "My uncle would be angry if he saw me speaking to you." She swayed a moment before she turned. Damn him, she thought. He had to say something.

Menol called to her, despite his better judgment. He did feel somewhat odd. "Are you always so anxious to please your uncle?"

Kili turned, and the growing darkness worked in her favor, hiding the gleam of triumph in her eyes. "I please whomever I like," she said, and Menol laughed. She didn't know if she liked the sound of it, if he was laughing at her. She swam to him, and around him slowly several times. She made it a challenge. "And what is it you find so amusing about that?" She sensed he preferred challenge to a docile response.

"You are amusing." He laughed again, more quietly now that she came closer to him, close enough to feel the warmth of her skin radiating. "You are so spoiled." His voice mocked her but she noticed he did not move.

"That's right, I am spoiled," she whispered, "I always get what I want."

"And you think you want to be Between?" Menol watched her as she continued to circle him, mesmerizing and slow.

"No, I know that for certain. I know there is no one better."

Menol sensed her certainty and power, and was attracted to it, and more interested than he knew it was safe to be. "And what else do you want?" He already knew the answer.

Kili, behind him, knew the question to be an invitation. She circled her arms around his chest, pressing her breasts against his back, laying her cheek against his neck. She had hoped to feel his heart beating faster, but

it did not, and without warning, he broke her grip and pulled her around to face him, his mouth a breath's distance from her own. Kili closed her eyes, waiting to be crushed against him, to taste him. Despite this strange and unnatural longing, Menol pushed her away.

"And what would your uncle say if he saw you trying to seduce his most detested rival?"

Kili longed to scratch his face, to make him cry out in pain, and again the darkness helped her. She quickly masked her anger and made her voice a melody of promise as she broke away from his grip. "Remember," she whispered as she backed away, "once I am Between, I can be helpful to more than just a dragon." She paused, the moonlight illuminating her dark silhouette against the silver sea. "And my uncle has no hook in my mouth." She swayed another moment and was gone.

Elan's bruises were almost gone, and each day she grew stronger. She took long swims with the Squid and began preparing herself for the Choosing. She remembered as many songs as she could; the Squid remembered others. He told her what he remembered of the Choosing and answered her many questions.

Elan thought little of the testing, or her fear. Whatever there was to face, she must face it. Her being was consumed with the knowledge that the Seadragons called to her, and what drove her was her memory of that awful place to which the Seadragons were called. She would not lose them to the abyss, not while she lived. The Ghrismogs could try to kill her, but she would compete. Her only fear was facing the chasm.

The Squid, though he was wise in the ways of many things, felt inadequate in his knowledge of what she would need in the Choosing. Elan felt prepared only because she had no idea of the difficulty of the task. She merely sang her songs contentedly and thought of the day that would come.

She was feeding the baby turtle and singing to a school of fish that had gathered near her when she sensed someone coming. She was amazed to see Tia and the Nemu approaching in the distance. The Squid, never far from her, came out to see them as well. Elan was so happy to see them that she shot forward and stopped near them in an excited burst of bubbles.

"I never expected to see you, Tia, Nemu, and how I longed for it all the same." Tia smiled.

"You called us, and then you say you never expected to see us?" Tia asked. Elan remembered days earlier the Squid had suggested she needed more expert advice. Elan had tried cross-speaking the distance.

"You heard me?" Elan was excited. "Are you sure it wasn't Squid?" She knew the Squid could probably cross-speak halfway across the sea if he wished.

"We heard both of you," Tia answered. "You still need more practice, Elan, but if I understand your message, then we must practice other, more important things."

"Then you know why I asked you here?" Elan said.

"I do," Tia answered gravely. "I would be honored to help you prepare for the Choosing." Something had been left unsaid. Everyone waited. "You understand the dangers, Elan?" Her voice was tinged with foreboding.

"Yes." Elan was solemn. "I think so, but whatever the dangers, Tia, I must try." Tia reached for her hand and found it. They swam toward the Squid's cave.

"Then, I will make you as ready as I can. We will not know all the dangers until we face them. You have seen the abyss." Elan grew cold at the mention of it. "There lies an evil we know. But there are other evils the Ghrismogs are capable of that you and I could never dream or prepare for. We will do our best."

They reached the lair, and Tia entered. Elan wanted to hug the Nemu she was so happy to see him, but she only laid her hand against his flank as she took his woven basket inside.

"You will stay, my friend?" Elan hoped he would say yes.

<Nemu to the Center Place must go, for news to listen.> His eyes were warm with his fondness of her, though his words were full of reserve. <Merra then know of what to beware.> Elan smiled at him and felt her eyes stinging with her affection for him. Good that tears were invisible underwater. Any danger was worth facing if it brought her friends such as these.

"Then please beware yourself, Nemu. Do the hunters still search this foolish Merra who will compete?" She thought she saw the smile in his eyes.

<This Merra more than ever they hunt,> the Nemu

said, glancing into the open sea. <The rumor to certainty grows.>

"Then you must be careful," Elan repeated, truly worried for him. She had the feeling, however, that despite the danger, his years living in the Center Place had been so confining that these passages through the open sea and his battles with his pursuers were welcome to him. Tia came out of the cave to bid farewell, and saying little else, the Nemu swam away, back to his place in the Caverns.

Returning to the lair of the Squid, Elan made Tia comfortable in a sleepnet she had brought with her and began answering Tia's questions about her preparation. Tia asked the Squid about the day at the abyss. Nemu had already told her, but the Squid's retelling of that terrible and wonderful day visibly moved her. That the Balance still found among them one to mark, one to hear the Seadragons, was a miracle to her. For a moment she took hope, and as the afternoon grew into evening, and Elan spoke of the garden and all the treasures there, Tia cried. Tia's lessons had been more bitter than Elan's, but even she, in the face of all that had happened, believed there was some plan within the Balance. Too much had happened for her to doubt that at the very least, they must try. Elan was the Between, no matter what the Ghrismogs decreed, and it was up to Tia and the Squid to ready her for the peril ahead.

They fell into a hopeful sleep that night, awaiting the morning, and anxious to begin Elan's training.

The next several days passed rapidly. The more Elan absorbed, the more Tia discovered of her old memories. Things she had forgotten came back to her as her present days, filled with songs as they once were in some distant time, became more real to her than the gray reality of the Caverns.

Tia was a patient and thorough tutor, and Elan remembered every piece of information as if her life—and the Seadragons' lives—depended upon it. The Squid was always there, observing silently, keeping a vigil over the two Merras. They did all their practicing, singing and cross-speaking, in the open sea at the edge of the precipice, where the cold currents came up from the black depths. It was an ever-present reminder of what waited for them. Day after day Elan's voice grew stronger and

clearer. It was a beautiful voice that often transported the Squid. It held the bittersweet melancholy that was life in the sea, yet it was also filled with her courage. He felt it change him and knew that the clear notes traveled out upon the currents and marked all who heard it with a new hope, though they knew not from where the light had come.

Each night Elan heard her voices, the voices of the Seadragons. Without ever having laid eyes on them, she developed a boundless compassion and love; she longed for the day when she could nurture them and strengthen them against the encroaching doom. That desire burned in her so passionately that she was filled with an inner light, as luminous as the moon.

After nearly a moon of learning the songs, Elan traveled with the Squid, Tia, and Tooki to a nearby stretch of shallower and warmer waters. Here the Squid watched for hunters and sharks more vigilantly than ever. There were sharks, but their nearness to Elan somehow made them docile. The Squid wondered if he imagined it, or if it were true, that there was some conspiracy among all the creatures around them to guard the secret they were learning: that a Merra had come, and was preparing to compete for Between. The Squid could think of no other reason they would have been left in peace for as long as they had been.

In the shallows were many lightfish. With both Tia and Elan calling, many fish gathered, and many more came even after they called no more.

Teaching of the patterns was more difficult for Tia. She seemed at most times to be accepting of her blindness, but now she felt frustration. She instructed Elan well in the levels of concentration and the techniques of reaching those levels, but the patterns themselves were remembered by the Squid.

With a vague sorrow he recalled the patterns used by the last true Merra Between he had seen. He described them as well as he could and watched as Elan tried to imagine his memories.

Elan practiced them over and over again, each day increasing their difficulty, expanding her level of concentration. Instead of disappearing, this endless school of lightfish grew larger. Some invisible calling went out into

the sea. Elan swam back to their cave weary each night, and in the dawn when they returned, the fish waited, ready to do as she bid them.

Elan never knew how beautiful the patterns were that she created with the fish. Her eyes were closed throughout, and only in her mind did she see what she orchestrated. Tia could only imagine that they were as perfect as they were. When Elan finished and thanked the small fish, then looked into the Squid's eye, she knew he had been moved by what he had seen.

More than a moon's time passed and Elan felt confident. Many nights she and Tia and the Squid talked until they fell asleep. Though Tia was still frightened of the dangers she knew Elan would face, she felt more confident as well. There were some things, however, they could not prepare for.

"I wish there was some way to let you know the horror of the killer whales," Tia said bitterly. "It is a Mog travesty, and if you did what was right and refused to be part of such cruelty, they would be only too happy to dismiss you from the competition."

<The best thing you can do is to call the beasts off.> The Squid's eye shone brightly as it reflected the faint moonlight that fell over the water.

"What is the best way to do that?" Elan asked.

"Your voice and cross-speaking are clear, Elan. They will hear you, and you know the danger song works, and the other calming songs. They will respond if you remind them of their dignity," Tia answered.

All of them grew silent as they thought about the third part of the test, the abyss, so full of evil that they were reluctant to speak its name in their living space.

"It's all right," Elan said.

Tia only shook her head. "I spend my whole life in darkness, so that is not what frightens me." She reached for Elan's hand. "The voices calling you down get stronger, you know that better than I, child, and my fear is that the other voices—the other voices are silent. . . ." Tia's voice trailed off.

"Please don't worry, either of you. I've been in that terrible place and I heard them, I know not to believe them this time. They will not take me again." Elan's tone was not as confident as she would have liked. Cross-speaking did not allow for subterfuge. But Tia and the

Squid did not mention the fear that touched them, unwilling to allow it to gain a hold.

Elan had had something on her mind for some time, but didn't know whether to ask about it or to let it lie. She looked at the Squid, barely visible in the moonlight, and she had to know.

"Many times during my training both of you have mentioned a Merra named Aaslan." Elan was aware again of the sudden pain that swept through both of her mentors. "Will you tell me why the mention of her name makes both of you heartsick?" She could feel them exchange an unspoken question.

Tia nodded to the Squid to answer.

<Aaslan was the last true Merra Between. The Ghrismog struggle for supremacy was succeeding, but many of the Merra, and Ghrismogs too, were wary of what the Ghrismogs in power promised. Aaslan was one of the many maids at the Choosing. I was there, hardly bigger than your turtle friend. She was radiant, so radiant she inspired hatred in the Ghrismogs. Hers was the Merra beauty that came from the spirit. With time she became more beautiful, and the Ghrismogs only reflected the drabness that was in their hearts. It made them fear her.

<The Ghrismogs in power feared Aaslan because they could not control her. Her love for the Seadragons was the only guide she followed. Their laws and proclamations meant nothing to her. They tried everything to keep her from competing in the Choosing. Her friends disappeared, her family was ruined. But she would not be frightened away, and they were desperate to make a Ghrismaid Between. The Ghrismogs' cunning is nowhere more evident than during the trials for Between. No matter how often the Merras were schooled before the tests, they were often tricked to coming to the aid of some ailing and plotting Ghrismaid. Many Merras lost the competition because of it, and some lost their lives. Aaslan was not tricked by them, though, and none will know what went on inside the hole.> The Squid paused, remembering. <I was there when she came out again, and she looked winters older than when she had gone in. The voices calling her back had grown weaker, but she did come back. And too many had seen her exquisite patterns. There was no question among the multitudes about who deserved to be Between.

<At that time, the Ghrismog Elders were afraid to go against the popular choice. As much as they were desperate to make a Ghrismaid Between, there was still enough opposition to force them to back down. Especially when the competition was so clearly won by Aaslan.> The Squid interrupted his story and looked at Elan.

<You understand that even if you win the trials, the Elders are not forced to choose you?> he said. Elan nodded. She could feel the tension increase in the cave.

<Much to their anger, Aaslan was made Between. In the Center Place thousands had come to watch the first meeting of Aaslan and the Seadragons. When the giant creatures swam slowly into the Center Place, no one breathed, so filled were they with awe. When the Seadragons hovered above the Merra Between, so large they were like islands, no one at any distance could miss the dragons' pleasure at learning that Aaslan would be their Between. The giant creatures glowed a phosphorescent silver green as the Merra sang to them and showed them the strength of her will to protect them.

<For the first time in countless centuries, the Seadragons produced four eggs instead of two. The future looked full of light. But the Ghrismogs were consumed by rage and greed. They determined to shame her, no matter what the cost to the sea—and to the Balance. They poisoned the kelp beds, and Mog assassins killed other Mogs like sharks, making the sudden spreading of evil look like the result of having chosen a weak Between. Lies were spread. Not all believed them but none foresaw the extent of the opposition's evil. I still do not understand it. They willingly invited the shadow to spread.> The Squid hesitated. Elan was afraid to hear more.

<A treachery greater than any before or since. The eggs were smashed. They were destroyed, made a sacrifice to Mog greed. Ghrismogs were so anxious to have it all that they were willing to bloody the future for it.> Elan could feel Tia's hands tighten around hers, and she began to understand their reluctance to speak of that time.

<The Mogs blamed it all on Aaslan, and fear made people timid. There was no mistaking how the sea became colder and darker. When Aaslan disappeared soon after, those who questioned did it quietly, then not at all. Some believed the sea had become so evil that some

maddened creature had eaten Aaslan, or that she had become maddened herself. For when the eggs were destroyed she could find little to believe in.>

"What do you think happened to her?" Elan asked.

The Squid turned his gaze upon her in the moonlight, a strange expression in his eyes. <I would like to believe she went to some Merra place, perhaps a garden, and there lived out her life. I would like to believe she had a daughter, who had a daughter. Because, Elan, you are so like her, you could be her reflection. In more ways than just what we see.> Elan was silent as she pondered this. She would have liked to believe it, too.

"The treachery will be no different for you than it was then." Tia's gentle voice held a warning. "You are ready for the Choosing, Elan, but of treachery you know very little." She paused. "I can teach you no more, and neither can this gentle friend." She laid her hand on the Squid's tentacle. "The rest, the caution and the courage, is up to you." Her sightless eyes stared out toward the open sea. "I didn't want to alarm you, but I have had a cross-speak message from Nemu. All is not well in the Center Place, and there is a new danger. He could tell me no more, but he will try to be here by dawn to tell us of it, and to take me back to the Caverns," Tia sighed. "The dangers will increase as the day grows nearer." She lay back in her sleepnet and closed her eyes. Elan wondered what new danger Nemu might be warning of, and her heart quickened.

<Sleep,> the Squid said softly. <Worrying will not help.> Elan drew the fine webbing of her sleepnet around her and felt the Squid's protective presence. Tonight she was safe. She was as ready as she could be, and she would face whatever came.

13

The Seadragons



It was not yet dawn when Elan woke suddenly, a heaviness in her chest. Anxiousness pressed in upon her. Had it been a bad dream? No. It was Nemu. She had heard him. She went out the mouth of the lair, into the dark sea, and swam in Nemu's direction. Behind her came the Squid and Tia, a hand resting on the tip of one long tentacle.

"Nemu!" Elan cried out as she saw the shadow of his form. She laid a hand upon his side and swam with him, back to Tia and the Squid. They entered the lair.

"What happened, Nemu?" Elan asked. The dolphin was ragged looking, though his wounds did not look killing. The Squid gave off a luminescence in his concern. Tia was at Nemu's side immediately, feeling his wounds, her love for him evident in her worried face and in the touch of her fingertips. Elan brought the older Merrra the basket of healing leaves she had taken from the garden. Both of them tended to their friend.

<Two days ago, the Center Place this Nemu left.> The salves they used burned in open flesh but the Nemu ignored his pain and told them what they waited to hear. <A Mog hunter with sharks followed, days in wrong direction this Nemu swimming was, the hunter to lose. Too deep, evil waters. Nemu escaped.>

"They still search?" Tia's voice was sharp. "No one knows we prepare Elan. Why are the hunters so determined?"

<Start a ripple, change the sea,> the Squid said. <As darkness creeps, so will goodness make itself known. Elan's song will have traveled even to the Caverns.> Elan found another wound in the Nemu's flank and went to a

farther section of the cave to find her last basket of the healing plant.

When she returned she felt a new tension in the cave; Tia was pale and trembling.

"What's wrong? Tia?" Elan became more alarmed at their grave expressions.

<The Nemu has learned who sends the hunters,> the Squid explained. Tia was more frightened than Elan had ever seen her.

"I don't know anymore," Tia said, her voice faltering. "We surely send her to her death. If not the hole, then Groff. Perhaps this is all too late, and all for naught, I just don't know." She swam deeper into the cave to be alone.

Elan was alarmed. "What has upset her this way? What is a Groff?"

<Groff is a Mog Elder,> the Squid explained slowly. <Nemu wasn't certain we would want you to know this, but I think it more harmful to keep it from you. Groff is grooming his own Mogmaid for Between, and since the rumor started that a Merra will compete, the whole Center Place talks of nothing else.>

<Groff, the Merra hate. Try to kill you, he will,> the Nemu said quietly. The Squid expanded unconsciously.

"And that is why Tia is so upset?" Elan asked, looking back in the cave where Tia collected her things for the trip back to the Caverns.

<Another reason, there is.> The Nemu looked at the Squid.

<It was Groff who had Tia blinded, with urchin spines. Tia was a child-maid, and at the last Choosing she refused to teach the Mogmaid Groff was then grooming for Between.> The Squid blinked.

Elan had no words, staring back into the darkness of the back caves, the darkness that was always Tia's world. Nemu went to guide his friend back to the others. When Tia approached them, she smiled. Elan could see that she had regained her composure.

"I am sorry to all of you for my doubt, for my weakness. You are ready, Elan. Even when the Merra were at their peak, you would have shone among them. The Balance needs strength and goodness now, and it will aid us in ways we will not know." Elan swam to Tia

and hugged her. She hugged the Nemu too, though carefully.

"When this is over, we will go to the garden, and take the other Merrra there," Elan said to Tia.

"I would like that very much." Tia straightened.

"Thank you for everything you both have done for me," Elan said.

"There is one more thing we may yet be able to do," Tia said. "I do not know if it is possible, but we will try." The Nemu presented his dorsal fin for her to ride, and Tia laughed sadly. "Would that I could carry you, my weary friend." She stroked his side. "We will swim together. It will be slower than you can bear, but we will have you well for your next adventure." Though the Nemu was ready to carry Tia, he acceded to her wish. Elan watched them leave, silently asking the Balance to protect them.

The following dawn, Elan said another farewell, this time to the Squid. He was adamantly opposed to her leaving for the open sea unprotected, but Elan felt she must.

Tia had mentioned several times through the training that Merras about to enter the Choosing customarily spent some time in solitude. The Squid argued that the garden would give her solitude, but Elan reminded him of how that place had given her a false sense of security. She wanted to be challenged by the dangers of the open sea. She would take her sleepnet and be gone just a short time. She needed to make herself ready in a way she could not explain. The Squid wanted to come, he would stay out of her sight, but Elan convinced him by saying she would soon be going into the competition alone, and that at some point he was going to have to let her go. She had to know that challenge as well. The Squid twitched with annoyance and his skin put on a colorful display of worry for her as she left. Even Tooki was forced to stay behind. To ease the Squid's mind, Elan promised to cross-speak at some point to let him know all was well. The Squid had to be satisfied with that, and Elan was at last away from the lair, with a final instruction from the Squid. She was to go in the opposite direction of the hole. Elan laughed nervously. She needed no convincing of that.

She swam quickly along a long rock ridge parallel to the precipice that dropped into the deep water. While her senses were alert to any sign of danger, her mind went over the tests. There were ten days until the Choosing. She was confident about her cross-speaking and patterning. The thought of the angry whales terrified her, but perhaps that was not as frightful as it sounded. She made herself revisit the hole in her mind. She had never admitted to Tia and to the Squid that even the word filled her with doubt. The voices had robbed her of her ability to think. She knew now what was at stake, but would she remember it in the hole? When she had gone down before, she did not know that her death could bring about the end of the Seadragons. Could it? The giants had made do with the Mogmaid Betweens for centuries; would they continue as they had, the sea growing colder each passing winter? Elan wished she could believe they would harken to her voice, however frightening the responsibility. If she failed in the hole, the voices would surely beckon all the louder to the Seadragons. More than her own survival was at stake. Could she resist the calling down? If only she knew, she could bury her doubt.

She swam for one day, and another, and always the same argument played in her head. The eyes of creatures were upon her, some of them filled with awe, others with fear. She sensed no danger, though, and began to wonder as the Squid did, if some light within the Balance kept her safe from other tasks.

Consumed by her thoughts, she paid little attention to her direction. As the second day became the third, and the third the fourth, her course veered southeast, then slightly north again. She knew she should cross-speak with the Squid soon so he wouldn't worry, and she could get her bearings.

She continued north, her strength growing. Long swims were only empty, not difficult. Food was scarce, but there were always stray forests of kelp, and she had her blade to pry small shellfish from the rocks when she could find nothing else.

So subtly had her course changed that later Elan would wonder if some calling beyond knowledge directed her.

The young Merra was not aware that she had come

near the hole again until she heard the voices. The calling was faint, but it awakened in her an unspeakable terror.

She stopped, motionless in the water. She could still flee. Her heart pounded as she felt her doubts expanding. "I can hear no other voices but those," she whispered. "I've failed before I've begun." Elan could not bear the doubt. How could she begin the Choosing without knowing if the hole would take her or not? Now she had an opportunity to test herself, and she would either die before arousing any more false hopes or she would know she had beaten the voices. Part of her screamed to flee, another part urged her on. She swam forward slowly, keeping a frail hold on her own thoughts, making them stay her own. She did feel more in control, though still terrified as she rounded the ridge that blocked her view. There she saw it. The wound in the earth, that place of doom.

The voices grew louder, the promises sweeter. Elan no longer knew if it was herself or the voices that moved her. She swam closer still, not rushing as she had the last time, not a willing victim, was she? An eternity of peace was promised below. The others who had found it beckoned her, and Elan quaked as she dropped toward the black mouth of the abyss, touching the edge of the stones, feeling the darkness enfold her. Now she would know. It was almost peaceful, the way oblivion beckoned her with its bitter sighs. Now I'll hear the other voices, she thought as the last light from above grew dim. I must. But there was nothing. Only the roaring in her ears growing louder.

Elan thought she stopped, but she wasn't sure. She was waiting to hear the faint calling of the Seadragons. Was it there? Had she stopped or was it growing darker? The peaceful death around her suddenly exploded. Something large swooped down on top of her, grabbed her from behind around the waist, and pulled her up roughly, violently rushing from the hole. Whoever, whatever it was, carried her away. Farther and farther from the voices.

"Brainless Merra!" someone shouted at her through the blur of her thoughts. "Are you trying to kill yourself?" They swam still farther, and Elan felt limp. She no longer heard the calling. A strong arm encircled her, and whoever swam, did so with great strength and determination. Elan's confusion became anger. She had been pulled

from the hole again and would never know whether she would have survived. Had she stopped? Had she been about to turn back? From where had this intruder come?

"Let me go!" Elan yelled. He had ruined it.

"So you can go back, and add your bones to the rest? Do it when I am gone. I want never to feel the death in that hole again." Elan could hear the strain in his voice. Was he part Merra, had the voices beckoned him as well? She tried to see him behind her but all she could see was his chin. He didn't know how far to take her before she would no longer hear the abyss, so he kept swimming, though Elan felt him slow. The more she thought about what he had done, the angrier she grew. Because of him she would have to go to the Choosing not knowing. She hadn't the courage to face the hole again. The doubt in herself she had felt before was doubled.

"You oaf, would you let go!" Elan swung her elbow and punched him squarely in the chest. He gasped, but his grip did not weaken. Elan saw him looking back at the hole to see how far they had come, and her heart quickened. His face was full of grace, and though he was not all Merra, that was what she saw most in him. He took his eyes from the hole to look above them.

"You won't go back in there?" he asked with such concern that Elan was certain he must hear the voices, if even a little. She gave up her struggle and waited for him to let her go. She knew he was looking at her. Her long coppery hair floated around them, so he could see little of her. Now that he was convinced she would not race back down again, his grip loosened. Elan felt his touch gentle, and he seemed to become aware of the softness of her skin. She was becoming uncomfortably aware of him. She felt the full length of him pressed against her, felt his taut muscles, as powerful as the Nemu's, before when she'd ridden, when she had felt these same stirrings.

"I don't need you to help me!" Elan yelled, and it startled him.

Menol finally let her go. "Oh no? You were going—" He hesitated as she turned to face him, and to accuse him. His eyes widened with recognition. "You!" he said.

"I needed to find out, and you had no right to stop me!" Elan was still angry. Her eyes blazed, and her hair swirled.

"Had no right?" Menol was incredulous. "Merras don't come back out of that hole."

"Some of us do!" Elan would make him think so, even if she was not certain herself.

Menol only stared. When he saw the shape enter the hole from a distance, he had acted from instinct. He never dreamed he would see her again. This Merra who rides dolphins and whose image would not leave him in peace. When he had seen her before, he had thought her beautiful, but it had not prepared him for this. She was beyond his dreams. He had never seen a Merra this close. They were supposed to be insipid and pale, but this one was fierce. Menol stopped. She couldn't be the one who . . .

"You aren't going to compete are you?" he asked, almost fearful.

"I am." She made no excuses, but held his gaze steadily. "I have to." The raw passion in her voice hurt Menol. The young Elder had heard about Groff's hunters, and he was suddenly afraid for this luminous being.

"But Merras can't be Betweens," Menol recited.

Elan squared her shoulders. Her hair fanned out golden around her; with the sun behind it she appeared on fire.

"Merras are the only ones who can Between," she said with such sorrow and truth that Menol felt drained of all he thought he knew, and pulled into her soul. But this was against everything he believed. If what she said was true, then he had to doubt all he'd ever known. His anger was born from his self-doubt. A maid like Kili was what dragons needed.

"We cannot entrust something as important as the Seadragons to a Merra." Menol heard himself say something he didn't know was true anymore.

Elan's eyes narrowed in hatred. "You're a Mog?" Her fists clenched, and he knew she had mistaken him for a Merra like herself. "You? A Mog?" Her expression was suddenly strange, as if she knew something horrible that he had yet to learn.

"You can't see that they are dying? And that *you* kill them?" Elan gestured toward the open sea and Menol knew she meant the Seadragons. "And this is the way you think it should be?" Her question mocked him, and blamed him for the evils and barrenness around them. For the first time Menol feared the future, and he knew

the fear she faced. He wanted to touch her again but he saw that she hated him. To keep her, he memorized her mouth and eyes. He mourned that he would never know her.

"Don't try it." He couldn't keep the tenderness from his voice, and it struck her with more force than anger could have. "They'll hurt you. They'll never let you be Between." Menol flinched when he saw what his words had done to her. Something dimmed, some light, some hope for the future.

"If I die, the dragons die." Her whisper stung him like a ray. In it was no threat, just a terrible certainty. Menol could not reply, but floated back dumbly and watched her turn and leave him. How had she touched him so quickly? The stream of her coppery hair and her arching back moved farther and farther away.

Elan fled the truth she heard in his voice. "They'll never let you be Between," echoed in her mind. He hadn't said it to be cruel, but because he knew. Elan felt the shrinking of her hopes, and the inescapable breath of despair. The doubt she had taken with her from the hole now enveloped her more completely. She was afraid to die, but she would if she had to. But to begin something hopeless? Could this be what was intended by the Balance? Confusion roared at her with the same menace as the voices. They had planted a seed of doubt in her that had become a devouring force. She swam recklessly, not knowing or caring where she was going. These doubts strangled her, each taking their turn. The hole—had she been speeding toward her doom again? Had a Mog pulled her back? The dark voices had taken her and she would have died if it hadn't been for a Mog! She could still feel the way he held her against his broad chest, and his skin, the way he looked at her and the longing she had seen in his gray eyes.

A perverse thrill ran through her, the stirring to do the dance. A rush of shame couldn't make the feeling go away. She, a Merra, a Merra who heard the voices of the Seadragons wanted to dance with a Mog! To make love to a Mog! Elan felt a traitor to herself, to everything she believed in. She was a traitor to the Seadragons too. This Mog, and others like him, were responsible for the insidious darkness and the ruin that would come to the

sea. Why had he stopped her? How could she face the hole again? Why should she, when they would never let her be Between?

Elan swam. A day passed, and another, and still a burning need to exhaust herself would not let her stop. She ate nothing; she swam through the dangerous nights. Everything around her became fevered and muddled. Once she thought she heard the Squid cross-speaking to her, but she could not answer. All she could think about was if she competed, the abyss would take her. There were not enough voices to call her back. And if the abyss didn't swallow her? Then she could not escape the Mog's words. "They'll never let you be Between."

The moment Elan had known what he said was true, she had given up. She didn't care what happened to her. She had no thought for her safety. The Seadragons would have no one to call them back and they would answer the dark voices—they would fall down the abyss, let go their burdens of grief, and sink into oblivion, the sweet voices in their weary hearts. She was of no use to them.

Elan drifted to the sandy bottom, weakened by a mortal anguish. She had lost her sleepnet days before. She was cold and tried to pull the sea grass over her, to sleep, to escape, throwing back her head and closing her eyes. Whether days passed, or moments, she did not know, but she was not surprised when the shadow fell over her. A hunter? Kagor? It didn't matter. She felt no fear because now she would welcome death. She had no purpose and so could leave. She waited for the dull pain to begin, but there was nothing. In fact there was something not at all like what she awaited. She felt a radiance and heard a faint calling.

She opened her eyes slowly. The Seadragons were swimming side by side above her. In the Balance, there are no accidents. Elan would have thought it a dream because her eyes were blurred by fever, but other sea creatures came from their holes, even the eels, motionless with awe.

Elan held her breath. She could not see the length of them, only the motion of their bodies. Their color was gray and dull. Their heads hung down and their eyes were nearly closed, devoid of the desire to see. Elan remembered her lesson from Tia, and like a shell opening to bare its soft insides, she opened herself to the

Seadragons. She was suddenly pressed down by their pain and the weight of their constant anguish. She knew the despair that she had felt before must have come from her nearness to the Seadragons; it was but a prelude to this burden. Elan fought against this death feeling, now that she could name it and know its source. Using more strength than she had, she rose from the bottom and began her homage song. She knew what it meant, and why she sang it. On the day of the Choosing the Ghrismogs would not choose her, but at this moment, she was Between to the Seadragons.

What cloud drifts across your brow
will fade, enfolded in the tenderness of my arms.

And the plague that endless darkens your vision,
I take into my eyes, and dissolve tear for tear.

And what poison breath of enemies envelops you,
I breathe into my mouth, and transform to paradise.

And when bitterness creeps into your soul,
I draw it to me, to perish in the boundlessness of my
love.

And though the shadow of despair stretches vast,
forever will it shrink in the light of my devotion.

At first the immense creatures seemed confused by the voice, so clear, so long forgotten. It came from nowhere, so they thought it a dream from some other time.

Elan felt the exact moment their eyes found her, because she was nearly crushed by their sorrow, yet her voice remained strong. She was vaguely aware of others nearby. Guards? The Mogmaid? Elan didn't care, and they too were enfolded in this dream, unable to move.

Her song was an homage to the Seadragon, to all that was noble and innocent in the sea. The song was a pledge of the Merras' devotion. The dragons shook their heads as if to dispel their fear this might be illusion. When the Merra did not disappear, and when they knew her promise to them was true, they lifted their heads. A faint glow came into their eyes and pale flashes of silver-green flickered over their scales. The knowledge of their weakening bore down on her, and it took all her courage and all her will to stay open to them.

<We did not know there were any Merra left,> they cross-spoke to her, and to each other.

<I am here> was all she had the strength to say before she watched them swim majestically away.

It would not be long before the Seadragons answered the calling down. No matter what the Mogs did to her if she tried to be Between, no matter if the hole took her, Elan knew now she had to try.

Of the many who witnessed this encounter—the Mogmaid Between and her servants, and the special guards to the Seadragons—it was the Between who first recovered her composure. Several of the guards had wanted to help the Merra who lay lifelessly at the bottom. The reaction of the Seadragons to this “spirit” had not been lost to them, and their love of their charges was what decided the guards’ emotions. The old Between, however, saw only the danger to her position. The Seadragons had come to life as they cross-spoke with the Merra, and in fact their scales still shimmered. She forbade the guards to assist the fallen Merra and ordered the procession onward. The farther they went from this place, the more the memory would become like a dream, and the Mogs would doubt what they had seen.

But they had traveled just half the day when the Between and the others noticed behavior in the Seadragons they had never seen before. There was a rumbled murmuring coming from both of the giants, and the male Seadragon caressed the neck of the shedragon with his massive head. Because the light was failing they found shelter, and as the blanket of darkness fell, all of those present cursed, for though they tried, their eyes could not pierce the blackness to see what their senses told them was transpiring.

The sea around them hummed with the mating of the dragons. Though the guards rejoiced, the old Between could think of nothing but the effect of this turn of events on her reputation.

With the dawn she had worked out a plan that would give her credit for the mating. She could command the silence of those who had witnessed the meeting of Merra and Seadragons. But much to her fury, the old Between found with the breaking of the new day that her plan

would fail. Two of the special guards had left in the night. No doubt the news of the mating was on its way back to the Caverns. She sent two of her personal guards in pursuit, hoping they would be in time to silence the damaging tales.

The two guards who had left well knew the risk of deserting their posts. But it took little imagination to know what the Between would command of them, and during their lengthy association with the Seadragons and the inept Between, they had long ago concluded that the art of Betweening was not possessed by this Mogmaid, and perhaps by none of them. What they had seen of the Merra the day before was all they needed to be convinced.

Hari and Wynn had been friends for many winters. The monotony of their days guarding the Seadragons was broken by the stories they told one another and the remembrances of their youths.

Because their duty was to guard the Seadragons, they had spent very little of their long lives in the Caverns. Though they never spoke of it, because they did not know it, they had become less and less like Ghrismogs. Their proximity to the keepers of the Balance had made them different.

With very few words they had decided together in the predawn to head back to the Caverns with the news, and the truth. Their plan was to go to the High Elder and tell him of the strange events.

Though they knew it nearly futile, they first stopped in the vicinity of the Merra and Seadragons' meeting to see if by some chance they could find her and help her. The darkness and strange currents made it an impossible task, and the delay would prove to be a costly one.

They swam without rest. Luckily, the distance would not be far; because of the coming Choosing, the dragons' instinct brought them across the endless seas to be nearer the Caverns.

The guards knew the news they brought was joyous. Their distance from the Caverns and their unfamiliarity with the mood of the populace made them less wary than they should have been. They met many en route who knew them by their draping and weapons to be special guards, and the curious questioned them about their presence in the Center Place so premature to the Choosing. They were too anxious to tell of their momentous tidings

to keep silent. What they didn't know was that the old Between's personal guard had gotten word to Groff, and he had had guards of his own ready to intercept the two hapless messengers.

Hari and Wynn were surprised to be met by the Elder's special guards. They awaited their appointment with the High Elder in a small chamber. They could scarcely conceal their excitement, and they remarked that those few with whom they had already shared their secret had believed them. For even without their own accounts, there was a noticeable warmth on the current, as if something wondrous had happened.

Because there was little inside the Grand Chamber, or outside of it, of which Groff was unaware, he knew of the special guards' arrival before Edam did. It was a tribute to Groff's growing power that Edam was kept from knowing about their arrival until it was too late to alter the course of events.

When six members of the Elder's personal guard were sent to accompany Hari and Wynn, the two older guards went without suspicion. They thought the number befitting, considering the importance of their news. Had they known, it would have been inconceivable to them that they might be prisoners, that brother guard would turn on brother. They had no way of knowing how drastically the membership of their brethren in the special guard had changed. The duty and honor by which Hari and Wynn measured each decision had long ago been twisted in the Caverns. There were guards who would kill for a single pearl, others who slept through watches. Deep in the open sea, the many winters spent in the presence of the dragons had left Hari and Wynn unprepared for malice.

They were taken to a cave far removed from the goings on in the Grand Chamber. As Hari and Wynn entered they were puzzled that it was not the High Elder to whom they would be delivering their important news.

"So, I hear you are the bearers of joyous tidings." Groff smiled broadly, trying to dispel their uneasiness.

Hari spoke. "This is true, Elder, but your guards mistakenly informed us it was to the High Elder we were being escorted."

Groff waved off the question. "You have been away so long you most likely have no notion that the Choosing is

nearly upon us." The special guards did know this, and also knew by Groff's tone that he would accept no further questioning. Groff continued, "The High Elder is overwhelmed with details of the competition and has instructed me to deliver your news to him. So make us wait no longer. If it is what we all hope for, there is great cause for celebration, and we must get to it." His seeming enthusiasm encouraged the reluctant guards to report Elan's sudden appearance from nowhere and her burning luminescence as she sang to the dragons. When Groff understood that this chance meeting with Merra had led to the Seadragons' mating after barren centuries, he turned cold.

Hari and Wynn had not yet completed their story, and in the excitement of remembering that moment they were less alert to their danger. Groff knew he must act swiftly. Though he seemed to be listening, he gave a secret signal.

Hari was midsentence, remembering his awe at the quality of the Merra's voice, when he stopped. There had been no mistaking the glint of hatred he had seen in Groff's eye.

"Why do you stop?" Groff asked, his charade wearing thin. But Hari and Wynn had no need to answer, for into the cave came Za, a cruel-looking Mog whose business hung plainly on his belt—constricting bands for crushing bones and skulls, sharp blades for dismembering, and lock bolts for attaching the living to distant reefs. Unlike the hunters whose sharks spilled the blood, Za liked to do his own killing. Groff had paid him well many winters. Za noticed the look the two special guards exchanged. It wasn't fear so much as it was a gentle self-chastisement for having been naïve.

To Za it meant nothing that they knew their fate. To him, it was merely an assignment. As the guards led Hari and Wynn from the cave, Za's mind was filled with practical considerations. He was vain about his tidiness. He searched his memory for a crevasse large enough to take two new corpses, remembering one he had used not long before. It would only mean clearing the bones. Once Za wedged his victims into large cracks in the reefs, small crabs and other scavengers made good use of this new source of carrion, and left nothing to identify.

As the others began leaving the cave, Groff felt his

stomach churning violently. No matter how much proof he might be forced to swallow, he refused to believe it was Merras, and only Merras, who could *Between*. He watched Za's broad hairy back as he swam from the chamber. He had long wondered from where Za's name had come, and someone told him that Za had taken the name himself because it was the sound that escaped through clenched teeth—the last word on the lips of those who died in pain.

Two days later, Elan drifted in and out of consciousness in her sleepnet, closely watched over by the Squid and Tooki.

Opening up to the Seadragons had exhausted her strength. She had drifted to the bottom, but before she lost consciousness, the young Merra cross-spoke to the Squid. She was unable to tell him of her location, but her fevered mumbling at last allowed him to find her.

The Squid had carried her back and pieced together the main part of her encounter with the Seadragons from the fitful talking she did in her dreams. The baby sea turtle, with a wary eye on the Squid, had slipped inside Elan's sleepnet and watched her closely for signs of life.

The Squid cross-spoke the distance to the Caverns, and Tia gathered what she could to send with the Nemu who could travel much faster alone.

When Elan's fever passed, she opened her eyes weakly to find the Nemu and the others watching her. She smiled and longed to tell them of the Seadragons, but they would not let her speak. Their only concern was that Elan regain her strength.

She took some of the plants Tia had found, plants with the power to restore her body and spirit. Since there were only two days until the Choosing, Elan was as still as she could be, and complied with their wishes.

The Nemu had important news from the Center Place, but he and the Squid determined to wait until the following day to tell her. She was fragile, and the Choosing loomed closer. Elan chewed dutifully on the healing leaves and could feel her strength returning. Though she was weak, she had less of the death pallor about her and the Nemu and Squid hoped the worst might pass.

The day drifted into evening, Elan aching to know

what news the Nemu brought. The night passed as well, and Elan was able to sleep. When morning dawned, she was ready for the trip to the garden. It had been decided long before that she would spend a short time prior to the competition in its seclusion. It would strengthen her, and focus her upon her purpose.

"Will you tell me before we leave?" Elan asked. It was the Squid who finally answered. She was strong enough to hear it now.

<More odd rumors are drifting through the Center Place. It seems two of the guards assigned to protect the Between came back from their place with the Seadragons and told all who would listen their strange tale. They claimed to have seen some Merrra spirit singing to the Seadragons. They said she was made of pure light, and grew transparent as they watched. Their stories spread rapidly and Nemu spoke with one who followed the Seadragons' guards until he saw them being taken away by other guards. No doubt someone found their accounts damaging.>

"Why would that story be of any harm?" Elan grew excited, knowing something important had not yet been told her. "What is it?" she asked. "Why were the guards sequestered?"

<Some think the guards killed were,> Nemu said.

"What? Why?" Elan was shocked.

<The Mog Between has reported that the Seadragons have lain eggs.> The Squid hesitated while Elan took this in. <There are eggs, Between.> Elan grew silent. She watched her truest friends, and waited for them to go on.

<There is tension in the Center Place. Word of the eggs has spread with great speed, and though many rejoice, there is much disagreement about who is to take credit, or if it is true at all.>

<A maid, Groff's niece, the eggs hers, she says,> Nemu reported.

"What?" Elan did not understand.

<A maid who will compete, Groff's niece, claims it was she who was practicing her singing in the open sea, and that it was she who Betweened for the Seadragons,> the Squid explained.

"Could it be true? Could the Seadragons have seen both of us?" Elan felt unsure.

Her question made the Squid angry. <They must tell this lie. It would mean that a Mogmaid can Between. Few are bold enough to repeat the stories the guards told. Tia was right. All your training will not prepare you to recognize lies or to be ready for treachery.> Elan stared at the sandy floor of the lair. <Close your eyes, Elan. Look inside yourself.> She did as the Squid instructed. <What do you see?>

Elan was quiet for some time, then looked at the Squid and Nemu. "I am Between," she said, staring into the open sea. "That there are eggs I am certain. And that there are eggs is enough. May the Balance keep the souls of any who may have died for their news. We will go to the Choosing. If a miracle happens, perhaps I will be allowed to Between for them for all time." Elan felt happy, and was anxious to leave. She felt a tremor in her friend the Nemu and knew there was more news, news they were much more reluctant to tell. The Squid closed his eyes.

<Of this, Nemu not sure is—the Nemu are stupid, Ghrismogs think, so from us bother not secrets to keep. This Nemu, the Mog Groff heard with a special guard talking. Of mun and Seadragons they spoke. Mun and Seadragons.>

Elan felt a chill pass through her. It was a howl of triumph from the dark voices, knowing that with a plan such as this their greatest prize drew closer to the abyss. "The Mogs will try to use mun on the Seadragons?" Elan felt her throat tighten. "At the Choosing only, or do you think worse?"

<Without a Merra for Between, which they could never allow, they may fear it is their only hope to retain control,> the Squid said. And Elan believed he was right. The Mogs would invite this final disaster by feeding the Seadragons the numbing drug. They would hope that it would render the dragons less difficult to control. Perhaps they reasoned perversely that if the Seadragons were docile, so would be the sea and its encroaching evil. But Elan knew the mun would do only one thing. It would make the Seadragons less vigilant, and destroy their will to resist the voices. Elan fought against her feelings of helplessness. She would not sing her lamenting song before the deed was done. She looked at the Nemu

and the Squid. The baby turtle paddled at a safer distance, watching her too. All of them were waiting.

"We cannot let them," she said. With difficulty she left her sleepnet. Every part of her hurt. She went to get Tooki's riding basket, and when she had attached it to her knife belt, Tooki entered, looking ready for whatever lay ahead.

Together they swam toward the garden. Elan didn't think about the mun, or about the tests for Between. She focused only on the eggs and called on the Balance to protect them.

The Choosing



Menol and Edam were alone in one of the outlying rooms of the Grand Chamber, conferring about the last-minute details of the Choosing. This was also the first chance they had had to discuss a recent event that had left both Elders more certain than ever about possible treachery.

Menol, Edam, and Tuan had been in the Grand Chamber. Edam was studying a map of the Center Place, considering possible solutions to a major complaint he had had from the representatives of Gowlas, a distant cavern. They had several maids competing in the Choosing and had made the long journey only to find their accommodations inadequate and their positioning during the competition less than what they felt they deserved. They complained of favoritism.

One of the guards had approached and was waiting to be recognized by Edam. Menol thought it odd, because Tuan, along with Groff and Noja, had been placed temporarily in charge of the guard, special guards, and the garrisons. There were many details to be attended to, and the functions and duties of the guards were but one small part. At the meetings of the Elders it was Tuan who reported the progress that had been made organizing the guards in their specific areas, yet when it came to giving a guard a direct order, Tuan was unable. He made no move to direct the guard's attention to himself. Tuan glanced nervously at the guard, then at Edam's back, still bent over the map. The moment seemed to stretch on until Edam looked up, aware of the tension. Edam too looked to Tuan, questioning his reluctance. Before the guard could speak, their attention was drawn as Groff

labored in. Both Tuan and the guard wore a look of relief that the moment had passed and the guard quickly took his communication to Groff, obviously not recognizing Tuan as authority.

Alone in the small chamber, Menol and Edam discussed what they had seen. The guards protected the Caverns, enforcing laws and keeping order at functions such as the Choosing. When Edam had questioned them, Tuan and Noja claimed to be aware of all that transpired concerning the guards. But Edam was afraid they had allowed Groff to assume all the power over the guards himself. Menol questioned trusted friends among the special guard, and found that the commanders were accustomed to answering to Groff, and Groff had been making many decisions that were the responsibility of all the Elders.

It was now a tense situation. Edam sought a solution that would arouse Groff to no blatant acts of subversion. He saw no easy answers, but he had to be ready for Groff's maneuvering, for Groff would do his best to influence the decision of the other Elders in favor of his niece.

Aside from the threat of Groff, the preparations for the Choosing seemed to be under control. The news that the Seadragons had laid eggs had created an air of excitement and expectation. Edam had had the news confirmed. There had been another disturbing report about which he could discover no real information. He tried to find out if there was any truth to the rumor that Groff had had two guards killed. Both Menol and Edam had heard the whispers about the Merra, and why the guards had been taken. Menol kept his thoughts, for the time being, to himself. From what he had seen in the Merra, he wouldn't doubt for a moment that this "spirit" could have been her; he thought her capable of inspiring the Seadragons to lay. It was not an impression, however, that he could easily communicate. His mind was taken with other problems. He shook his head again and looked at Edam.

"Despite the eggs, despite the excitement, there is an ominous threat on the current."

Edam kept his face expressionless. "I wish I could disagree, but it is there, and it is something even more dangerous than our friend Groff." He looked out in the

direction of the Center Place, trying to divine from where it came.

"But Groff is where it begins," Menol stated.

"At least none of his hunters was successful. To my knowledge there were no Merras killed," Edam said. "Groff has become an artist at abusing the law."

"He knows how to bend each truth to serve his treachery." Menol was grim.

"Had I any proof of even one of his crimes, I would certainly have disposed of him at his earliest transgression. But he has his whole day to plot out his cunning while I must decide which emissary will be next to which in order that we might avoid war." Edam laughed bitterly. "Why is it using one's intelligence for the benefit of all isn't satisfying enough for him?" He smiled at the young Merramog. "I suppose you and I will never know the thrill of accumulating wealth. Do you think we are missing anything?"

"What is of more interest to me is how a Mog like Groff can inspire loyalty. He has the allegiance of at least half the other Elders, and how does he manage that? They know better than most about his deceptions. There is no one less trustworthy, yet they believe the promises he makes."

"They know he is a dangerous ally, but they also know he will stop at nothing to get what he wants, and since most Mogs, including the Elders, always want more, they see the benefits of aligning themselves with him. They abhor his methods, but they are willing to close their eyes if they can share in his prize." Edam tried to smile.

"It's obvious that he is maneuvering for control; all that is left to chance is at what moment, and how many of the guard have gone with him," Menol said.

"Let us hope the others, when it comes to the point of making any decisions about leadership, will value the future more than profits, enough to go against Groff."

"What of Kili? We make our task against Groff next to impossible if she is made Between," Menol warned. Edam shook his head. Menol could see he had already given it much thought.

"That is the unfortunate part. She is perfect for Between. She is fierce and intelligent. She is also self-serving, and I do not trust her any more than I do her uncle. But the power of the Seadragons is great. Proxim-

ity to them can warm the stoniest heart. If she were to grow to love them, think what a warrior she would make protecting her charges."

"You would sacrifice your position as High Elder to allow it?" Menol asked.

"Let us say that if I believed she would make the best Between, and if I believed she could benefit the future more than I, I would be willing to trade my opportunities for hers."

"Groff would make a very bad High Elder."

"Vicious. Perhaps we would not have to take the one with the other." Menol was silent as Edam watched his face. It was obvious he had other things on his mind and the High Elder waited until Menol was ready to share them. Menol did have other worries. He couldn't drive the Merra, or the things she had said, from his memory. The warning so clear in her tone was present behind his every thought.

"Why couldn't a Merra be Between?" Menol could see that his question was not the one Edam had been expecting.

"By law, of course, they are allowed to compete and could be Betweens, but do you mean why I think they should not be?"

"Yes, I would like to know your thoughts," Menol said.

"I look around us at what they were able to build. I have heard the stories of the lush forests of fruit and their ability to heal the sick, and I am less and less proud of what we have become. Every time I look at a Mog like Groff I am ashamed for all that is Ghrismog. But it remains that we are here and they are not. The sea has changed—and the Merras' greatest charm, their innocence, seems to go hand in hand with a killing fault: the weakness of will to survive at any cost. Believe me, I wish there were something I could do to change it all, but this is a critical time, and how can we ask the Merra to save us if they cannot save themselves?" Edam was still for a moment with his thoughts, then looked at Menol. "What has you so troubled?" he asked.

"I met the Merra who will compete," Menol replied.

"So it is not a rumor," Edam said, oddly hushed.

"Edam, she is not weak. She is magnificent. She is more possessed of power and light than anyone I have

ever seen. She said things to me that make me doubt that what we do is right."

Edam was glad Menol had confided in him. "That is what I like about you, my friend." He smiled. "I admire your courage in questioning what is right—and I am envious of your energy to do so." He placed his hand on Menol's shoulder and smiled kindly. "The future will unfold as it does. We will weigh all that is presented us and try to do our best." The two Elders swam toward the exit of the cave.

"Let us see how your Merra does at the Choosing tomorrow. Perhaps she will earn herself two admirers."

When Menol left the Grand Chamber and entered the Center Place, he was amazed to see the many thousands already gathered to see the Choosing. It wasn't until tomorrow, but they all waited; there was an indefinable expectation on the current, much different from the festive feeling of most ceremonies.

Many in this crowd had obviously come from far away and had a different look. These were the Mogs and Merramogs who chose to live away from the Caverns in the open sea. It gave them a more wary eye, more alert in every way. Here in the caves, comfort made for monotonous characters, duller for having had no need to fend for themselves.

Menol was most surprised by how many Merra he saw. He didn't know they still existed in these numbers. No doubt they found life in the Caverns intolerable. Perhaps word had spread even to them that a Merra would compete. Many of them watched him cautiously, and many of the Merra were being given dark or curious looks by the Ghrismogs who passed. Menol, wearing few of the trappings common to the Elders, often passed among the crowds without notice. But this day he too, because of his likeness to the Merra, was drawing some less than friendly glances.

Menol was curious about the Merra now, despite what Edam had said about their docility. Menol wondered how many had the strength his golden Merra had. Perhaps none. He wished he knew her name and found himself searching in the crowd for her, though he had little hope of seeing her. She was no doubt being protected somewhere, this close to the Choosing. Menol

warned himself that he was behaving foolishly. He could do nothing that would jeopardize his position, not so much for his own needs, but because it would leave Edam even more vulnerable to Groff than he already was. But the Merra's face—and the sweet smell of her skin and hair—haunted him. He wished he had not seen the hatred in her eyes. Stop it, he thought. Merras were myth.

"Are you looking for me?"

Menol recognized the seductive voice and turned to see Kili swimming toward him. She looked even more confident than the last time he had seen her. Perhaps, Menol thought grimly, the Mog hunters had brought her good news. He tried to see her more fairly, as Edam did. "Shouldn't you be training?" he asked.

She was very near him, staring at his mouth. "Oh, I am ready," she said, "and anxious to be done."

"And your uncle, is he anxious to be done with it?"

Kili's slanted eyes narrowed at him. "He would like me to be Between," she answered cautiously, not certain what he meant.

"And he has been very helpful, hasn't he?" Menol accused her. He was surprised when she flushed with embarrassment.

"I only learned recently that my uncle had hired the hunters. I demanded that he call them back, and he did," Kili went on. Menol knew that Edam had warned Groff about the hunters, and Groff had been frothing with rage as the Choosing drew near that they had come no closer to finding the Merra. "I have nothing against Merras, and you will see that I need no help beating them." She touched the pearls at her breast.

"What makes you think one will compete?" Menol tested her.

"I've heard the same rumors you have, but I am not afraid." She started to leave, and with her head cocked over her shoulder she looked at him lingeringly. "I know the Elders will choose the right maid for Between."

Menol watched her leave and wondered why she had made what she said sound like a threat.

Elan pressed her face to the side of the Nemu as they swam toward the garden and held on as tightly as she could. They swam very slowly, and Elan was afraid they

might guess how weak she still was. She did her best to conceal it, and the Nemu and Squid did their best to conceal their knowledge of her lingering frailty.

Elan could feel only pride that she had Betweened for a moment for the Seadragons, with never a thought of regret. The experience had left her weak and this would increase the dangers of the competition, but what had come from her chance meeting was eggs. She wished she remembered more of it. It had all been so much like a dream.

They kept up a steady pace. Elan could feel Tooki shifting restlessly in his bag. Now that he had faced the dangers of the open sea and the Squid, he was less content to be a passenger, but all his adventures had done nothing to improve his speed.

Slightly ahead of Elan and the Nemu, the Squid swam. Elan saw that the nearer they came to the garden, and the nearer to the Caverns and their final destination, the more mottled and red he became. His need to protect Elan from the dangers she would be facing made him fearsome looking.

The entire journey from the Squid's lair there had been no sign of the hunters. Elan wanted to sing to the Squid and Nemu, but they asked instead that she save what strength she could. So she tried to clear her mind, to think only of the Choosing. But other fears crept into the still pools she tried to make of her thoughts. Before, when she thought about being Between, the dream felt like a child's. It was all honor and innocence, but now the same dreams were held captive to consequence. What she wished for most, the well-being of the Seadragons and their eggs, had become an elusive end, as difficult to grasp as a drifting blossom. The simplicity of her dreams had been sacrificed to her growing awareness of the threat looming about them at all times. It had all changed when she learned what had become of the Merrra. And the overwhelming horror of knowing the Ghrismogs had a plan to use mun on the Seadragons. What arrogance to think they could fool the Balance.

What distressed Elan most was that this vileness made her more weary than fierce. Where inspiration was contagious, so was malevolence. Her mind strayed once again to the gray-eyed Mog who had pulled her from the abyss. She ached with wondering if he had any knowledge of

the plot. The Nemu slowed his pace, distracting her from her worries. She looked around and saw that they were nearing the garden. Each of them searched in all directions to make certain no one would see Elan enter, and moments later they arrived at the mouth of the passage.

<We will wait here until the dawn, Elan. Find peace in your garden, Merra,> the Squid said. Elan caressed the Nemu's side as she slipped away and swam for the first time in days by her own power. She masked her difficulty and smiled at the two who had become her protectors.

Feeling Tooki struggling to be let free, Elan opened the woven bag; he shot out toward the entrance. Elan remained silent, unable to find words for parting. She touched the backs of her fingertips to her forehead and closed her eyes a moment. They watched solemnly as she disappeared between the sea fans and into the crevice.

While the Nemu swam into the open sea, on the lookout for danger, the Squid backed solidly into a large cave nearby, all but his watchful blue eye blending with the rocks.

Because of the stone Elan had placed in the entrance hole, she had to feel her way back along the cave wall, and several times she felt the small turtle just beyond her fingertips. Some inner eye led them, and though she could still see nothing, she knew they had entered the crystal chamber. She swam toward the ceiling and felt for the outline of the smooth stone. She found it easily and pushed hard against it. The stone slid free of the entry hole. The light that burst through was so dazzling, she had to look down. Beneath her the crystal spires burst to life, and the entire cave shimmered with brightness.

Tooki hurried in ahead of her, paddling with ecstatic speed, and Elan slipped in after him.

She was back. How different this sacred place felt to her now that its ghosts had faces and names. With her new knowledge, Elan felt she had some part in the legacy. She felt as if she belonged.

She found the ledge and attached her sleepnet. Then she swam slowly into the sections where the healing plants and the fruit trees grew. Elan picked all of the leaves Tia had instructed her would best replenish her strengths, and brought them with her to the surface of the water.

She swam to the enclosed room and found the mosaic

of the Seadragons. I have seen them, she thought with awe. They had looked at her and allowed her to sing to them.

Elan pulled herself up onto the mossy rock and stared at the magnificence of the dragons. She ate the leaves and fruit and quietly absorbed all the gifts the garden offered.

Later, when the daylight through the crescent moon window above began to dim, Tooki swam with her to her sleepnet. She offered him the last of her fruit, feeling tranquil and full. When she entered the sleepnet, Tooki came in with her and nestled in the floating hair near her neck. Echoing her contentedness, or she his, both of them began to fall asleep quickly. Elan thrilled as her dreams approached, for she was certain that from this sanctuary, she heard more than just the Seadragons calling. There was another sound, the faint whispering of new life. The eggs.

Elan left again at dawn. Tooki followed her out, though she tried to warn him of the dangers the day would hold.

Outside, the Squid and the Nemu waited. Elan was warmed as their concern gave way to gladness. She knew she must look different than she had the day before. The despair she had borne into the garden had been swallowed up, and once again she was luminous with purpose.

They swam toward the Caverns, and Elan thought it better to swim than ride. Today her guards agreed.

As they neared the Center Place, even before they could see what it held, they were aware of the many thousands present to see the Choosing. They too felt the tension on the current, the water thick with expectation.

They had timed their arrival well, for all was in readiness. Elan, the Squid, Nemu, and the small turtle entered the Center Place. Each was stoic, and grateful for the presence of the other as they felt all eyes in the Center Place fall upon them. An eerie silence spread through the vast arena, and it was all Elan could do to keep moving forward.

She had never imagined there were this many living beings in the sea. The Center Place overran with spectators into the surrounding reefs. In the middle was a circle of white sand. As she swam at one end of this ring, looking across, the figures at the far end were small and

unrecognizable. Like a vast cup, or a flower lying open, the walls of the Center Place sloped gently upward. The waiting crowd hovered over every inch of the living caves and looked down upon them. Those farthest up and away at the edges looked like minnows.

Elan looked up into this crowd and could make out no expressions. She could hear the odd hush change to a murmuring. Most simply whispered, "Merra."

She could feel the crowd awed by what it saw, and knew there was a good reason. What a strange sight they must make, a giant squid, fierce and protective, a grave Nemu, a Merra, and a small turtle using every ounce of courage to follow this Merra to the Choosing.

Elan glanced at her companions as they swam forward, feeling strangely calm as they stopped before the raised platform of the Elders. Several of the Elders looked down upon her with fear. Others were aghast at her audacity. One by one Elan looked at their faces. She knew Groff by his hatred of her, and remembered him stealing Maadu's pear. Edam was obviously High Elder, because of his central place on the platform and because of his bearing. She was surprised to see kindness in his eyes, and she followed his glance. Her breath stopped. There was Menol. The Mog who had pulled her from the abyss was an Elder! She despised him even more.

The look tore at Menol's heart but helped him strengthen his resolve. No matter how beautiful she was, or how fierce her belief that Merra were the only true Betweens, he had to convince himself it could not be. He remembered Edam's words: "They can't even save themselves."

Elan saw the cold resolve harden his face. "I am Elan, a Merra, and I have come to compete for Between," she said proudly. One of them started to protest, but he was silenced by Edam. The Squid billowed out even larger, his angry colors rippling. He wanted no thought of opposition. The hum of the crowd grew louder.

"Welcome, Elan," Edam said with a sincere smile, "and welcome to your friends." He gestured to Nemu and the Squid. He could not see Tooki paddling behind. Elan thought she saw a curious admiration in his eyes.

"The trials are about to begin," he said, directing her toward another nearby platform. "So if you will join the others?" Elan nodded and swam toward the other maids who would be competing.

Ghrismog guards were stationed at the point beyond which noncompetitors were forbidden. Elan looked at her companions solemnly before she left them, and the Squid and the Nemu positioned themselves as close as they were allowed to the platform, both alert for any hint of treachery.

The Mog guards tried to look unaffected by their nearness to the biggest squid any of them had ever seen, and one that undulated in angry waves of red and purple.

As Elan took her place upon the platform, she was aware of the other maids' reactions to her. There were nearly twenty Mogmaids and Merramogs. Some had hatred in their glances, others were awed, but most were too frightened of the trial to allow her much attention. One maid smiled, though, and moved little by little toward Elan.

"Hello," the maid whispered, "don't let this make you afraid." Elan could feel the dark Mog maid study her. "My name is Kili," she went on. Elan turned to face her and saw the split-tailed maid's eyes widen in recognition. Her false smile faded as she remembered when they had met. So this was Groff's niece. Elan remembered her saying as much, that day in the Grand Chamber. She remembered her too well. Both of them turned their attention to the instructions for the trial.

The Merramog explained that the maids would be led onto the vast sand center of the arena and positioned with equal distances between them. There they would wait until Mog herders brought in the schools of lightfish for the patterning. Each competitor was to have a school of adequate size above her with which to prove her patterning abilities. Elan could still feel Kili staring at her; she turned to see her smiling again, her dark tail crisscrossing beneath her.

"I heard there would be a Merra trying," Kili whispered. "I'm glad you are here—everyone should have a chance at being Between. It's only fair." Elan did not respond.

At the front of the group, the Merramog had finished her explanation and began leading the maids from the platform into the broad expanse of flat sand. Elan heard the growing rumblings of the crowd. She made herself forget the thousands of them and turned her mind to the task.

The maids were positioned so their patterns would not collide and so each could be seen clearly. All of them faced the platform of Elders, but Elan had been placed most distant. The crowd grew quiet.

Edam swam to the front of the platform and raised his arms to call for complete silence. All eyes turned to him. "Today is a historic day," he began. Elan was amazed at how well the sound of his voice traveled in this huge arena. "We are here to witness the Choosing of the Seadragons' Between!" He stopped to allow the cheering of the crowd to die down. It went on for some time. "And we are here to celebrate our future, and the laying of the eggs!" Edam stopped again as an even louder roar went up from the crowd. All of them had heard the news, but they cheered as if hearing it for the first time. Elan felt the wall of sound roll over her and closed her eyes to return to the peace of the garden. She let go her excitement, and even her pride, that she had, for a moment, Betweened. She was calm again when the exclamations finally trailed away. Edam continued in a more serious tone.

"Now, more than ever before, the choice is critical. No one can ignore the grave times we have ahead of us, and it will take a Between of immeasurable courage to accept the responsibility we will place on her." The crowd listened, Edam's change in mood affecting all of them. "And so," he almost sang, "let the Choosing begin!"

An unnatural stillness came over the crowd and the sea, and Elan sensed the moment had arrived. She looked once toward the Elders' podium to find Menol. He was too distant to see clearly. She worried that she let him into her thoughts. "Not now," she whispered out loud, and made herself stop looking for him.

The Mog herders moved clouds of silver lightfish into the testing area. One by one the maids were surrounded by thick schools, and they waited for the signal to begin.

When the Mog herders neared Elan with her own school, she saw that the small fish that gathered above her were dull with age, and many had broken tails and fins. Her heart skipped a beat, and she hurriedly looked at another of the schools near her to see if it too was in such poor condition. It was not. The school above Kili was bright with youth and all of them healthy. So the treachery begins already, Elan thought. She did not have

to wonder which of the Mog Elders had so carefully arranged this.

She made her anger disappear and replaced it with the calm of the garden. Tia had repeated time and time again that anger could block the patterns, so Elan closed her eyes and held her fish with her mind, waiting for the signal to begin. She took them all to her inner vision of the garden, and she felt them brighten slightly with interest.

The conch shells rang out, and there was a buzzing in the crowd. Elan felt the confusion in the fish who understood nothing but eating and pleasure and fear. She felt their fear of the crowds and blocked it out. She began by picturing the small fish tranquil, and as her concentration intensified, she became with them the patterns she had learned from the Squid, the patterns that had been Aaslan's. Elan faltered and felt the fish stir, for she had allowed herself to think of the Squid, and his sorrow for Aaslan. But Elan brought them back and showed them all what was good inside her, and told them to have no fear. Slowly they felt her kindness and were happy to comply. At that moment of harmony, Elan fell with them into the Merra patterns, and they became the beauty of what she imagined with great effort of her concentration.

From his position on the platform, Menol could see each of the maids' patterns and her ability to control. His eyes returned constantly to Elan. He had seen immediately that the school she had been given was old. He had helped to gather the silverfish, and had seen millions of them. Enough to know that already the odds were against the Merra. Menol wondered who Groff had bribed.

Some of the maids' patterns were crude and simple. Fish changed their positions out of sync, some designs were lopsided. Other maids lost their designs completely, and the fish scattered, leaving the maid below, her eyes closed, unaware she had already failed.

Kili was placed, of course, at the center. Menol was surprised to see that her patterns were even and controlled. Hearing a rustle through the crowd, he looked at Elan. Something strange was happening. The school above her was expanding. Many of the fish who had strayed from the other maids were joining the pattern above the Merra. Menol, as did everyone, watched in awe at the pattern taking shape above the slender maid. Even some

of the fish from maids who had control were leaving to join the vast cloud of silver above her.

At the edge of the great sand circle, the Squid hovered motionless, his eye looking outward, but his memory inward to a day five hundred winters before. The memory filled him with the pain that never left him, but the vision before him filled the ancient creature with a keen joy.

In a synchronized ballet, the thousands of fish fell into a long shimmering line. Each movement was designed to catch the light of the sun, so the pattern flashed from silver to gold warm light.

The beginning of this line of fish began to circle above Elan until the end took up and was followed by the beginning. The fish continued revolving and reflecting flashes of the sun out at the crowd. In one exact instant each of the thousands of silverfish changed direction and revolved in the opposite direction. This circle of light was vast in diameter, and at its center was Elan, her copper hair floating and her arms outstretched. Not a single fish strayed, and none slowed. The fish were spun within a spell of pleasure, and the same spell drifted out and over the crowd. No one saw the other maids, for all eyes were on the Merra.

In the next instant, as if they were as fluid as the sea, parts of the ring swam upward in concentric circles. Each group that broke off made a smaller and smaller circle until the dome of glistening fish closed itself into a high arch over Elan, who swayed and shimmered with their reflected light. This dome of silver revolved first in one direction and then the other, and in a graceful movement, the base of the dome separated into seven petals, swimming up as they revolved, coming level with the apex of the dome and expanding farther out. Now the school was on the same plane, a flat revolving surface alive with light; the inside of the petals began revolving faster than the outside until the ends folded back on themselves. At an exact synchronized instant, the fish rushed inward toward Elan and moments later burst out like an explosion, each to a precise distance, creating a sphere around her that continued to rotate.

The crowd was completely silent, all eyes wide with disbelief and awe at beauty beyond imagination. The revolving sphere created an impression of magic and

grace and wonder as the sphere exploded once again, the fish shooting like stars straight out from their center. Here they hovered for a breathless moment, then in a wall of silvery movement, they rushed joyously back to Elan and clustered around her so tightly she could not be seen. Elan reached her arms out into this cloud of lightfish and thanked them in cross-speak. They knew her pleasure and felt her joy. And in this moment the crowd, held captive by the radiance, fell from their dreams and knew that what they had seen was real. Elan too, in this moment, came back from her trance. She felt the tickling of the fish pressed against her, all trying to touch the source of their pleasure. Elan bid them farewell, and some of them obeyed and drifted away.

Elan could see the crowd and knew somehow that the Merra patterns, so long forgotten, caused them to stare at her as they did. She had no knowledge of the old patterns, and though she saw awe in their eyes, she felt no vanity, nor victory. She felt that she had done her patterning well, and that Tia would be proud.

The Mog herders came out among the maids and began calling the fish to them. Most of them were herded away, but many were reluctant to leave Elan. Finally nets had to be brought to force them to go.

The maids were led back to the podium. Everyone in the crowd had momentarily experienced innocence and had felt transported by beauty and artistry forgotten, but their child awe dissipated in the rush of expectation. The next trial of the Choosing was the killer whales, and it tested the maids' courage. This test would be as fierce as the last had been ethereal. As preparations were being made, those who had been too far away to see which maid had created the patterns of such beauty were told that it had been the Merra. The crowd spoke of her, and many argued. Making silly fish behave was one thing, but making a killer whale back off? Some were distracted by the screams of a believer. He wore the rock belt of a follower of the one-who-bleeds-but-does-not-die. He warned all near enough to hear him of the evils of the Merra. Few listened to him, however. It was time for the second trial of the Choosing. The maids were being gathered together.

Menol felt the fear tighten in his chest as he watched the two killer whales in the distance being herded toward

the Center Place. He tried unsuccessfully to quiet the anxiety the netters had awakened in him, and reasoned that the whales would not kill each other, would not harm the maids—would not harm *her*.

The thousands hushed as the first killer, black and white, grace and death, was moved toward the arena. The bull male's intelligent eye studied everything, and Menol was chilled to see the malevolence there. Several of the maids grew white with fear. Kili, her head bent near Elan's confidentially, blocked Menol's view of the Merra. Menol wondered with uneasiness what new trickery was planned. Mog instructors were making certain the maids knew what to do.

Rings of netters and herders clustered around each whale. Menol recognized the two netters who had spoken with him. Their jaws were clenched and their fists tightly gripped their spears. As the first killer tried to break free, the netters darted about, yelling, then regrouped. By waving their spears, they managed to maneuver the large whale closer to the sandy bottom, near one side of the large circle.

The maids were led to the center of the arena. Elan and Kili were at the front, and Menol could at last see the Merra's face. Her eyes were wide at the horror about to take place, and she looked for some calm within herself. Near her, over the crowd, was the Squid. All of his attention was upon Elan and the killer whale.

A rumble went up in the crowd, when, at the far side of the arena, opposite the first killer, thick Mog netters swarmed around the second, distracting him and moving him toward the center ring of sand. The whales were still some distance from each other, but the tension that sparked between the two beasts filled the whole arena with dread. Menol looked at Elan and could see the horror she felt—not fear, but a sense of terrible wrong. He felt it too.

The Mog netters darted one way and the other, waving their spears, nets across their arms. They moved the second whale closer, and the echoed gleam of malevolence swept into the approaching killer's eye. Menol looked again for Elan among the maids. Many of them twitched with fear, others swam instinctively away from the approaching whale, unaware that they were backing closer to the first. Menol at last saw her, her eyes closed, a

frown upon her brow. She seemed in some silent communication, and Menol was certain this battle raged within her before it was seen by all in the crowd, because across her face played all the rage that sparked between the two giants. All the while the Merra fought for control.

A rumble of fear rose from the crowd as the second killer was positioned. At this moment, the whales were left by the distracting netters and allowed to lock eyes, one upon the other. Several of the maids screamed, caught in the fierce current that passed between them. There was an endless moment of complete silence from the crowd as the two killer whales hovered motionless in the water. Then, in a simultaneous explosion of fury, the two beasts charged.

A shock wave jolted the crowd as the whales crashed headlong. A roar of rage mingled with the screams of the crowd. They tore viciously, then parted.

Two or three of the maids, too paralyzed by fear to move, were crushed in the first clash. Their broken bodies drifted away from the fray and were hurriedly taken off by some netter brave enough and composed enough to venture near the battle. More screaming erupted from the crowd as they watched the two beasts rear back to build up speed for the attack. Once again they raced toward each other and smashed headlong, their jaws tearing and their blood clouding the water. In the frenzy that followed, several of the netters were crushed by the tails of the killers, whipping as they attacked. One of the injured was the younger of the two netters he had seen, and Menol saw him carried away by the elder.

Now the killers circled each other. Menol couldn't hear if they made sounds, not over the roar of fear from the crowd.

About ten of the maids remained near the battle, either too frightened to move or not knowing where to flee. Menol searched frantically and at last saw Elan, her eyes wide with shock. The killers reared back to charge again and smashed into each other so hard that Menol could feel the thud of the collision against his lungs.

The giants ripped at each other savagely. Their thrashing tails came close to the crowd as the death struggle was carried on currents. The cloud of blood and sand whipped from the bottom obscured the scene, but the killers rose above it to make their next charge.

As the nightmare the netters had predicted unfolded before his eyes, Menol saw something frail and golden appear at the center of the circling combatants. It was Elan; the Merra was trying to stop them. Menol smothered a cry, feeling Edam's restraining hand upon his shoulder. A clear voice, as clear as starlight, pierced the screams. The killers circled and stared, unaware of the Merra that hovered between them. They clashed again, nearly crushing her. Menol thought—hoped—this charge had been more reluctant. The circling slowed somewhat, and the Merra glided between them, first close to one, then the other. Her voice grew louder as the fear of the crowd ebbed, perhaps calmed by the same song she used on the killers. They quieted, some cowering, some watching with dread at the diminishing of the beasts' savagery. Menol could not believe, nor could anyone else, the sight before him. Blood trailed from the long gashes in their flanks. The malevolence still shone in their eyes, but their circling grew less frantic. They made mock charges but pulled away before they crashed.

It was only at this moment that Menol spotted Kili in the fray. She made certain that she was more visible to the crowd than Elan, keeping her position to the side most visible to the Elders. She swam grandly around the killer whales, darting in, then away, all to please the crowd, while Elan swam between the two killers, almost invisible in the blood of their wounds. Menol longed to swim out there and tear Kili away from her lie, but he knew he could not interfere. He only hoped that the crowd, and the Elders, would not be tricked by her claiming of the miracle. For it had been just that.

Menol was stunned by Elan's heroism. A truth had been exposed in the last few moments that could no longer be betrayed. A terrible wrong had been done to the Merra. Menol was sick with guilt at his own blindness to the ongoing travesty. No matter what the consequences, he knew he was changed from this day on. His anger matched that of the killers. Ghrismogs like Groff would destroy it all.

Elan, caught in the web of the killers' rage, and her own rage to keep them from killing each other, had an awareness that the struggle abated. She hovered in a dream that was the heart of despair, and her peril was but a shadow of this abomination. What loathing for the

living spirit could have created this test? Her awareness of herself had disappeared at the first explosion of the killers' rage. She knew the blindness of their fury and took it into her, enveloping it with all the courage and strength she had. More than fear, Elan was filled with anguish at the rape of their majesty, reduced to a sport. Her songs lamented the betrayal of their dignity. She had felt their anger lessening, and she kept singing, cross-speaking, using all her strength to heal them with the tranquillity that was in their nature.

In a haze, Elan realized they had at last swum in opposite directions, and she knew she had kept them from their destruction. But it had cost her the last of her strength. When the whales had lost all desire to harm each other, had recognized her truth, they had shuddered and swum away from the Center Place. At that moment, Elan lost consciousness and drifted toward the bottom.

Thinking quickly, Kili tried to reach Elan to carry her toward the Elders. But the Squid was wise to her purpose and billowed out in warning. Kili backed away, angered. The Squid picked Elan up gently and, using the rest of his arms to create a curtain of privacy around her, swam away, followed by the Nemu and the turtle. The crowd nearest pressed close to see her; all were chilled and confused by what they had seen.

Then something happened that surprised Menol. He expected, now that the danger had passed, the crowd to roar its approval of a battle well fought. Their blood lust had been more than satisfied. Later, he would wonder if the Merra's song had touched them as well, reminding them of what little dignity remained to them and making them examine the horror they staged for pleasure. In the gesture used for disapproval, one by one the spectators picked up small stones and tapped them in a regular rhythm against the rock beneath them. At first the banging was just a clattering of noise, but as their anger built, it became synchronized and the sharp sound of unified disapproval barked through the water. Menol had so little faith in Ghrismogs at this point that he wondered what they disapproved of, but he noticed with some pleasure that the one made the least comfortable by the complaint was Groff.

Menol felt a physical pain at the sight of the Merra, her limp body barely visible, as she was carried away by

her protectors. He had seen all her courage and strength burned up in the struggle. She would be forced to face the last trial in three days. He wondered how she would ever regain the strength she would need to face the abyss and felt heavy with disgust at himself and his kind. There below him he saw the crowd collecting around Kili, who glowed with her pretended victory. Her gestures were confident, and she pointed often to the Merra, now barely visible in the distance.

One by one those listening to the Mogmaid lost their certainty of what they had witnessed, for to believe what they had seen went against all they were taught. This would take as much courage as facing the whales. None would willingly give up his sense of righteousness. Menol dreaded what was to come. It could be nothing less than the death of Elan. There could be no other end.

15

The Breath of the Abyss



Menol noted that the passages were darker than usual. The populace was stealing the caged glowfish, preparing for the foray into the open sea. It was a trip few of them would suffer if it were not for the glory of witnessing the emergence from the hole of the next Between.

Most would begin the journey the following morning, as would Menol. But tonight Edam had asked that Menol make unofficial visits to some of the grog shops. These establishments would be supplying the grog to the many who would need provisions en route. Hunters would gather fish as the spectators progressed. Selling them to the travelers, they made a handy profit. Other vendors had hired strong young Mogs to transport sea vegetables on float sleds, to be sold to any who would not bring their own.

The gathering holes—and there were countless numbers of them—were the habitual centers for entertainment and socializing. Most of them served variations of the same grog, a fermented gruel of sea vegetable and salt. The formulas for the grog were secrets, passed down from grog masters to their sons.

Only three or four of these families supplied all the grog to the Caverns. During celebrations, and certainly for an event the size of the Choosing, prices were raised, and more unfermented sea vegetable was added to the grog mixture. The populace, feeling cheated, demanded regulation. Units of the guard had to be sent out to test the mixtures. The grog was sold in, and consumed from, the air-bladder bags of rockfish. Menol's duty this night was to tactfully let the grog masters know that no testing

would be done. There was already anger and tension enough on the current.

When Menol entered the gathering hole, he was studied with suspicion, as he usually was. The rowdy talk soon rose in volume once again when he was recognized by his draping as Mog, and a powerful one at that. Besides, the others must have reasoned, what Merra in his right mind would come into a gathering hole alone? Menol gestured for a bag of grog.

"When will Timo be in?" he asked. Timo was a graying Mog, renowned for making the best grog in these Caverns or any other. Menol pierced a hole in the bag with his blade and tasted the mash. It was good, and this one at least had not been diluted.

"He's not coming in—too much to do," the grog dispenser said.

"What about his sons, are either of them here?" Menol asked. The Mog he questioned looked as if he might dismiss this overcurious customer, but something in Menol's manner made him think better of it. He called over a maid who was singing in a corner. No one was sorry to have her quit her song before it ended.

"Watch things for a bit," he said to her, and to Menol, "I'll see if I can find Cutter." Menol nodded to him and drank his grog. The maid studied him with interest as he drifted into the mass of Mogs shouting to be heard.

The Mog yelling loudest was a guard Menol recognized from Groff's chambers. A small crowd was gathering about him.

"That Merra bewitched those fish. You'd have to have the brains of a fish to think she was the one who drew off the killers."

"She was in between them," someone ventured. Menol's anger rose.

"Of course she was—she was stunned. She didn't know where she was."

"It was the Mogmaid Kili," called out the speaker's companion, another guard. "She was in complete control. You want to know why it wasn't the Merra? She was terrified—she was as white as a flounder's belly."

Disgust tightened in Menol's throat as he watched the crowd nod in agreement. He wondered in how many other gathering holes this dialogue, so obviously orchestrated by Groff, was being played out. Those who had

been to the Choosing, those who had witnessed Elan's courage with their eyes and hearts, would begin to doubt what they had seen.

"Eh, but it was a fine battle, wasn't it? And that Kili—what a brave one she is—beautiful too." The guard continued, as if to himself, "I've heard some say they thought it was that Merra, but they must be blind. I was there, I was posted right in front of the Elders' podium. All I can figure is nobody could actually see—they were so far away—"

Menol interrupted him. "We saw a different Choosing then, you and I." There was a sudden silence. The guard stiffened, not yet aware of who had the effrontery to question his word. He followed the many pointed stares that fell upon Menol and shifted uneasily as he measured Menol for possible confrontation.

"What say you, friend?" the guard asked.

"I am no friend to you, guard, and when you address me, it will be with the respect due an Elder." The crowd murmured, and the guards whispered to one another.

"Beg pardon, Elder. . . ." The guard's voice trailed off meekly, but Menol did not miss the flash of hatred in his eyes. "I, we didn't know—"

"Enough of your drivel, guard, this place stinks already from the lies you were paid to spread."

"Paid, sir? No one's been paid," the guard protested.

"We're just saying what we saw—" the other guard began.

"What's going on here?" a voice boomed, and the crowd parted. Cutter shoved his way through the gawkers, but his expression relaxed as he recognized Menol. "Get back to your own business," he threatened, and tilted his head in respect at Menol. As he and the Elder swam toward the back room, Cutter leveled an annoyed glance at the guards. Menol and the fearsome grog master's son had met each other only a few times, but each sensed qualities he respected in the other.

Cutter gestured to the guards. "They've been here all night. The crowd changes but their speech stays the same. I don't know if what they're saying is true. I wasn't there, but I do know they're up to no good."

"That they are," Menol said. Cutter led Menol to the business chamber and once there offered Menol another bag of grog. Menol at first declined.

"As a favor to me." Cutter held out the pale golden offering, visible through the transparent membrane. "It's special aged, made from sea pears."

"Where do you find sea pears?" Menol asked as he took the grog. He had carried the anger into this room with him but felt it dissipating at Cutter's genuine friendliness.

"If you vow to keep a family secret—I meet a beautiful Merra on the new moon, and she sells us what she has collected from the open sea."

Menol tasted the brew and his eyes widened. "An art—your father is an artist of this age or any other." He meant what he said, rolling the pearlike taste across his tongue.

Cutter beamed. "You do me a great honor, for it is not my father's but my own artistry, and a creation few have tasted." He counted the praise of a Mog like Menol of real value. "My father considers any brew outside of grog sacrilege. It is my own special hobby—besides, I would buy rocks from this Merra for an excuse to meet her, if I did not think it would make her suspicious."

Menol laughed, then they drifted in silence a moment. He tasted again of the pear nectar, and a small smile crept back onto his somber features. "With grace like this, grog master, we can be assured of at least one bright pleasure in our future." He raised the bag in salute to Cutter, who knew somehow, what Menol meant.

The two Mogs conversed well into the night about the coming test and the future of the Caverns. Menol delivered the news that had brought him there, asking that Cutter spread the word to the other grog masters. Cutter said it would be done.

As dawn approached, Cutter returned to his many preparations for the following day, and Menol began his swim toward his own chambers. As he came into the open vastness of the Center Place, now nearly empty, it was difficult to envision the violence that had played out just half the day before.

The killer whales had gone off in separate directions, but Menol wondered where the Squid had taken Elan. He thought of Groff's thoroughness, of the lies ensuring Kili's position so carefully spread, and it made him worry for Elan's safety. He was grateful that she had her loyal

companions, because it would take that and more to keep Groff from killing her if he had the chance.

The passage would take three days, and ail approached the hole with different degrees of dread. Menol swam alone. He had seen his mother and sisters earlier as they, and many others, made their way through the open sea. The abyss was feared by all. The crowd could take comfort in its numbers, but the maids who competed were forced to face their fears alone.

In the two days it had taken to reach this encampment, Menol had heard further lies. Kili was taking full credit for separating the beasts. Few disputed this, and Menol saw no Merra among the travelers to the chasm. Perhaps they did not have the hearts to watch Elan go to her death.

During the procession, Menol had looked back frequently from his place among the Elders and seen the giant Squid gliding with his fragile passenger in his arms. Elan lay as quietly as the dead. Everyone allowed the giant creature a safe distance. Though many longed for a closer look at the Merra, none of them wanted to be crushed for his curiosity. She seemed almost transparent in her sleep, and Menol knew she would not have the strength to face the chasm.

When each day's journey had come to an end, Menol tried in the dim light of dusk to talk with Elan, to explain how she had changed his life. But the moment he neared where she slept in her webbing, he saw the Squid swell with warning, and the dolphin, his stone-gray eyes fixed upon him, come forward with threat. Menol gave up. He really didn't know what he would have said to her. He could not stop what would happen.

The third night came, and Menol, from his place in the rocks above the gorge, looked out over the valley, at the many spectators who waited for the morning and the last trial of the Choosing. Small dots of light lit their camps for as far as Menol could see. The vague dark forms of sleepnets were draped everywhere, and Ghrismogs huddled around the cages of lightfish.

Menol looked in the direction he knew the Merra slept. The weariness of her ordeal had not passed, and her guardians kept a vigilant watch over her.

Menol was not surprised at their loyalty to her, for he

had begun to feel an echo of it himself. He had to try to see her one more time, so he left his sleepnet and headed toward her. He had to speak with her before she wasted her life for nothing. The Elders would never choose her. Groff had swayed more than half of them to his desires, and as far as Menol knew, even the majority of the spectators from the Choosing believed what they heard from Groff and Kili and their many supporters, instead of what they had seen. The Elders would never jeopardize their power by allowing a Merra to Between. Menol knew that no matter what, he had to warn her. But first he had to get by her living fortress.

"Don't you want to wish me luck for tomorrow?" Menol was startled from his thoughts and stopped as Kili came toward him from the shadows.

"Why is it you can never make a normal appearance? Must you always lurk in the night?" Menol was not surprised to see her.

"I wasn't lurking, I simply don't like to be predictable like most other maids. It's better if you never know when I'm watching you." Kili swam coyly around him as if appraising something she would soon own. It was not lost on Menol.

"Why are you out tonight? Tomorrow is not going to be easy on any of you."

She stopped in front of him and looked up into his face. "I've told you I wasn't afraid—didn't you see me?" She waited for him to answer, and Menol knew by her tone that she must believe her own lies. She was actually waiting for him to praise her.

"I saw you," Menol said.

Kili was immediately aware of the criticism in his tone, and she suddenly looked in the direction he had been swimming. "You think she did it, don't you? How could you ever know? You weren't out there, you didn't taste the blood. I was there and you didn't see in my mind! I deserve to be Between! It was me—she wanted you to think it was her, controlling them, but I felt her mind—I am much stronger than she is. She just has you bewitched like she has her other creatures." Kili stopped suddenly, aware of the shrillness in her tone. Menol only waited, his silence making her more defensive and furious.

"After tomorrow, Menol"—Kili backed away from him, now practically shrieking—"it won't matter what you think!

You'll be no more than my pet fish if I want it, and that's the law. The Between takes what she likes!" She struck at him and missed, then shot away into the darkness. Menol watched until she disappeared and until the last trace of her fury drifted away behind her. What she had said was true; Groff counted on it. But Menol would not think of that now. He had to see Elan.

He hesitated as he neared Elan's encampment. Coming upon the Squid in the partial light had been dangerous, but from the darkness? Menol was formulating a plan as he approached, and as he swam over a cluster of rocks, he nearly collided with the giant Squid. It was as if the Squid had seen into the darkness and had divined his coming. The creature swelled and loomed above him, but Menol did not move, only looking up at it as it swayed with phosphorescent anger. Menol had believed that sea creatures were not of Mog intelligence, but had been forced to reexamine all of his thinking, and so he looked squarely into the Squid's eye.

"If you can see so clearly in the darkness, then you should see in me no desire to harm your Merra." Menol felt strange enough speaking with a Squid, but felt even more strange when he realized he was waiting for a response. "I need to speak with her."

The Squid's blue eyes scrutinized him, looking beyond him to see Elan slip from her sleepnet and approach them. Menol could see her more clearly as she came near, illuminated by the dim light given off by the Squid. The Squid and the Nemu seemed to wait for her direction. Elan looked at Menol, then at the Squid and Nemu. Menol heard nothing but saw what looked to be communication between them. The Squid and Nemu drifted away a short distance.

"Have you come to give me another lecture about why Merras are unfit to be Betweens?" she challenged him, despite her weakness. He couldn't help but recall her, so frail in comparison to the killer whales, holding back the horror with her will. He felt humbled by her courage, but Elan could not see the softness in his face.

"No." Menol kept his voice low. "I have come to warn you that the Elders will not pick you no matter what happens tomorrow at the trial." He felt her eyes on him, and thought, with longing, that she was close enough for him to reach out and take in his arms.

"It seems I've heard that before," Elan said.

"And you will still go down?"

Elan at last understood that the plea in his voice was for her. "Don't you see that I must? There is the smallest of hopes that I might be chosen, but only if I try. And I need to know that I am Between, that once in the abyss I will not answer to the dark voices but to those that call me back."

"But there are no other voices," Menol said, and Elan's face grew very sad.

"Then the hole will be my tomb." She said it with no fear, only a bittersweet wish that it might have been different. Menol knew that nothing he could say would change her mind and nothing he could do would protect her. He wondered if she had heard the lies Kili and Groff had been spreading.

"If you must do this tomorrow, if there is no stopping you, then there is one maid, the dark one, Kili, who is especially dangerous to you. She may have some treachery planned, and you should beware."

Her eyes examined him curiously. "Why are you telling me this?" she asked softly.

Menol wondered how he could ever answer, he was so touched by the radiance in her, and so moved by her courage. She embodied all that he found valiant, and all that was worth protecting from harm. "Because I believe everything you have told me" was all he said. The moon had risen high enough in the night sky that a faint light fell on them.

Elan looked at Menol and knew that he cared what happened to her. "You'll promise not to try to stop me?" she asked.

Menol nodded, knowing he should leave now. He saw the farewell in her eyes. "I would give anything if it could be my voice that would call you back, Between," he whispered. As he drifted away from her he made her and her companions the sign of respect. Elan closed her eyes and smiled.

As Menol swam past the Squid and the dolphin, the image of her face was still in his mind. He knew that in the morning, when she disappeared into the black chasm, she would take all that was light with her.

It had been light for some time. Elan lay within the

confines of her sleepnet. Tooki was with her, and she saw the Squid nearly blocking the mouth of the cave they had found her for shelter. He had hoped she would sleep, but she could not. So near the chasm, they had all watched over her closely, their devotion keeping her from becoming heartsick.

Even from this distance, she felt the tugging at her insides. She knew now that this beckoning was most dangerous when it promised blessed rest, for she was weary, and longed for the peace of falling. Elan had hoped to hear her own voices, those of the Seadragons and their eggs before her dreams took her, but there were no dreams and no voices. Only the long night.

Tooki stirred; the Nemu hovered near the Squid. Elan knew that it was time.

The Squid moved to one side and Elan passed through. She wished she could lessen the burden of her friends, for they bore more than she had to, worrying about her and the outcome of this day. She touched them both and took her place between them for the swim to the starting position.

Elan felt them solemn and grave near her, and she felt all eyes upon them as they swam. No one in the crowd spoke, and Elan did not look into any of their faces. She had no desire to see the anticipation of her death there. Many of the spectators pressed close as she passed, and the Squid flailed arms to frighten them back. Elan wondered where Menol was. Many of her thoughts in the night had been of him, and she was sad that she would not know him.

Near the holding area for the maids was a raised platform of stone fashioned ages ago for the Elders. Elan saw Menol there and felt a surge of compassion for the hurt she saw in his eyes.

With a hand upon each of her friends, she took her leave to join the other seven maids who remained in the competition. Kili and several Merramogs floated motionless, staring anxiously toward the abyss. The more Merra blood in them, the more white with fear and trembling they were. Elan could hear the faint calling down, but the voices were not strong enough and she was not close enough to be overwhelmed by them.

Around the maids the crowd was dense, and it scattered along the passage between the holding area and the

chasm. At the hole, and all around it, those who had come to watch the final trial were even more tightly packed. These were the more stout of heart, and even they were tense and anxious at their nearness to the evil place. Streams of bubbles boiled up from fissures in the mounds of black stone, and a foul stench was everywhere. A constant growl emanated from the hole and buffeted against ears and lungs. Mog guards kept the crowd from coming too close to the hole, though few dared. Other guards kept the passage to the abyss clear for the maids.

The sharpness of Elan's fear was dulled by a certainty that the Balance would be made right one way or another. If the Seadragons' voices called her back, if she did not sink to her death in the bowels of the black chasm, then perhaps a miracle would make the Elders choose her as Between. There was one among them who believed; now Elan had to believe it was possible. Just as she had to believe that she would hear the other voices, that they would not be too faint. The crowd stirred, sensing the time had arrived. Elan turned one last time to look at Nemu and the Squid, and she heard a murmuring in the crowd watching her. They were curious about her every gesture. She glanced at the maids around her and saw that Kili no longer feigned friendliness but stared at her with open loathing.

Elan closed her eyes to bring back the peace of her garden, but it would not come. She tried again; it was closed to her. Her fear grew, and she opened her eyes and looked imploringly at the Squid, then quickly hid her thoughts. As much as the Squid believed this must be done, if she let him see a faltering in her resolve, he would whisk her away before she had taken a breath to tell him no. She had to do this. She had seen the Seadragons, and that would be enough.

The growling roar grew louder, then a sudden hush fell over the crowd. Another of the maids was crying. It was time to face the darkness, and Elan felt a surge of excitement in the voices that called her down. Sounding more like a moan than a signal, the single note rang out. The trial had begun.

All together, the maids swam slowly toward the chasm. Elan tried to steady her pace, to stay back with the

others who heard no voices, or only faint ones. All around her, she was aware of the hush, the breathless watching.

The dark voices grew stronger now as they neared the chasm, and their promises were clearer and louder. It took all of her strength not to rush to the calling as she spotted the hole ahead of them. The maids were upon the hole now; the black mouth swallowed one of them, then another. Elan drifted a moment over the hole and looked out once more at the light and the faces around her. They were filled with fear for her, not the loathing she had expected, and in them she saw the horror they imagined waited for her below. The last face she saw before she drifted downward was Menol's. She was glad she would take that with her.

This time there would be no Squid and no strong arms to pull her out. As the vile smell of the place reached out to her, so did the voices. They roared with such triumph, her thoughts fled. The darkness invaded her, and she felt her own being fading. The mouth of the abyss swallowed her up, and around her Elan was aware of the other maids falling too. If any had hesitated, they all would have fled, but there was no escape. Elan heard someone crying, but there was no one to comfort her, each caught up in her own terrible purpose. The deeper Elan went, the less she was able to resist what waited below—her death, and eternal bliss. For now she became one with the dark voices' desire. Elan felt the maids near her as they continued down toward the cold breath. The light around them grew dimmer and the voices more enticing. She tried to still her mind; she had to hear the Seadragons. She had to believe the songs of all the lost Merra were not eternally mute.

When Menol saw her hover that moment above the chasm, he raced to her in his mind and pulled her back as he had before. He could endure her hatred if he knew she was alive. But she had made him promise. She knew he would have less courage than she would, when the moment came. It was all Menol could do to keep from breaking that promise. What terrified him most was the expression on her face. He had heard that the purer the heart, the more the dark voices feared it and wanted to make it their own. Elan's face had been filled with ecstatic radiance as she answered that dreadful calling. As her long graceful body, calm, and unnaturally still, disap-

peared into the chasm, Menol's heart shrank with his fear.

In his mind he saw her luminous beauty enveloped in the murk, and he mourned. He was so consumed by this feeling that he did not hear the commotion until Edam touched his shoulder. There were distant voices, and Menol could not see from where they came. Suddenly the crowd parted to allow passage to the singers. It was a haunting song that chilled Menol and all who heard it to the bones. When they finally appeared through the crowd, it took Menol a moment to realize what he saw. They were Merras, at least one hundred of them, maids and male, some young, some old. All of them were fierce, and afraid at the same moment, and all of them sang with determined voices. They moved toward the hole, and the Mog guards hesitated at their approach, not knowing whether they should stop them. Groff tried to make them hold their positions with a command from the platform, but Edam roared out his orders that they be allowed to pass. The guards obeyed Edam just in time, for the line of Merras would not have stopped. The Mogs backed away in confusion, and the Merras song filled all with a strange melancholy that seemed to cut through the evil from the abyss.

Menol was certain that something in the words fought back against the darkness that emanated from the chasm. The long line of Merras took hands, their knuckles white with the pressure. Their voices grew louder as a Merramaid with long silver hair and sightless eyes led them in a circle around the mouth of the pit. Groff cried out, staring wide-eyed at the blind Merras. When the many Merras had completely surrounded the hole, they looked down into the blackness and their voices filled the abyss. To Menol's astonishment, some of the crowd broke away and started for the circle. Most were Merramog and somehow knew the words to this strange song. Menol saw with pride that his mother and sisters were among them, ignoring their fear to sing to the Merras below.

Menol looked into the faces in the crowd nearest to the singing and could see the fear in their eyes begin to calm. The frenzy gave way to a steadiness, and Menol glanced at Edam to see if he saw it too. Everything passed in the look between them. A great admission that all they believed had been proven false in this moment. Menol

looked around at the other Elders and saw that most of them were mesmerized by the song and by the fierce battle being waged before their eyes. Evil pitted against innocence. Which voices would be stronger? Which would win the Merrra?

Inside the utter blackness of the pit, Elan felt the frantic thrashing of the maids about her, some scratching to be free, others paralyzed with fear and simply falling farther down. Beyond the hypnotic spell of the voices, her awareness told her that they traveled dangerously deep. Here the ears would break and bleed and lungs crush. Her brain pounded, and the darkness pulled her still deeper. The suffocating pressure became intolerable, and one of the maids, senseless with panic, rushed by Elan to her death below, and another followed her, so anxious to escape this pain that she lost which way would save her. Elan had no doubt now that she answered the voices to her death. This was deeper than she had ever come and there were no other voices, nothing that interrupted the constant calling down. The Balance was gone, and she would help to pull it down after her by her death. She felt a stab of sorrow for that, and for the grieving of her friends.

As the voices and the depth crushed her, a new lightness filled her head. It was peaceful and pleasant, as joyous as her ride upon the dolphin had been. She remembered it, and remembered flying. She could almost hear the Nemu laughing, but the sound was not quite like laughing. What was it? The darkness around her penetrated her senses with a new determination, somehow more desperate. There was a surge in the voices that swallowed her, and Elan thought they sounded different. They were sadder somehow, and they were separating. She couldn't move anymore, and she knew she was dying. She was glad for the peace, because she felt so heavy. She could listen to the voices now, the melancholy sound of the sweet voices. The calling that had somehow changed. Elan had a dull remembrance of how she knew they would be different, and it started like the narrowest beam of light in her darkness. It penetrated the void she had become and shone behind her eyes, almost painfully. The voices forced her to live, making her find strength she no longer had to come back. It would be so easy to let go and sink to the peace of nothing. She was tired;

her body would not move when she sent it her feeble commands. But the voices above would not let her go. They pulled with the same entreaties, the same burning insistence. They were calling her back.

Elan knew then what they were, she remembered why she had come into this place of death and why she must leave it. She strained against the weariness that had deadened every muscle and smothered her will. Searching for every shred of strength, she forced herself to kick once. She didn't know if she moved, she could feel nothing, but the demanding voices above rose and she kicked again. This time icy water enveloped her. She knew that she was going up! Desperation grew in the voices below, but the others, the ones that loved her, were stronger. Each moment Elan answered the calling from above, the darkness beneath was forced to draw back. Each kick toward the surface brought more clarity to the voices above and to her purpose. She felt a rush of joy as she saw the circle of light high above her. It was nearly blinding, and her excitement at escaping this place was bursting inside her. They were calling her back; there had been other voices, she was coming, and the Seadragons would have voices to sing to them. The light was still far away and Elan knew her weakness, but she would make it, and never come back here, never. She rose as quickly as she could, her mind so filled with relief that she did not see the figure looming near the wall of the chasm above her. Her eyes were so full of the light above that the sudden flash seemed part of the same light. She had forgotten the treachery of the Ghrismogs.

Kili swept out from the shadows where she hid and grabbed the Merra by the hair, a knife blade shining in her other hand. She drove it toward Elan's throat, but Elan caught her wrist in both her hands and crushed it so hard Kili cried out and dropped the blade. It threw off deadly flashes of light as it sank into oblivion, but Kili's hold on Elan's hair redoubled. She pulled Elan down again with all her strength, knowing if she got her deep enough the voices would take her at last, her strength too spent to fight them. The voices below surged with new violence and triumph, and the voices above faltered at the unknown force that built against them.

Elan remembered Menol's warning, and knew too late this must be the dark maid. She remembered that Kili,

oddly, had worn her pearls into the pit, and reached behind her head to find them. She twisted them until Kili choked, and the maid screeched. Elan aimed a kick as high as she could and felt it land solidly. Kili let go and Elan raced again for the surface, away from the voices and away from Kili, who would do anything to kill her. But Kili's strength was born of desperation and she again caught the weakened Merra, first by the arm, and again by the hair. Elan turned toward her and, in the gloom of light from above, saw the rage and madness in her eyes. Elan struck out and hit Kili in the throat. The Mogmaid's grip weakened and Elan kicked again with all her strength toward the light. The Mogmaid held back with a loathing, but Elan pulled them both toward the surface. Kili yanked and tore down; the pain was sharp but only added to Elan's determination to be away from her, and away from the evil of this chasm. She strained so hard she could feel her neck bending back, but the light above grew brighter as she thought she saw faces, Merra faces.

At that point Kili knew she had lost. Giving one last pull, she used Elan to shoot out from the hole first, still dragging the Merra by the hair. Once they had cleared the hole, Kili let go. Elan would have attacked her there but for the circle of Merra she saw. A circle of Merra singing. Elan relinquished her rage at the Mogmaid and had just enough strength to join the others. The voices below were no less dangerous now, and Elan could see in the Merras' haggard faces what an ordeal this nearness to the chasm had been. She found Tia and took her by the hand, squeezing. Tia's tears drifted on the currents. Slowly, still singing against the evil from the abyss, they were led away by Elan.

Everyone was entranced by the sight of the Merras swimming away. Menol felt life return to him when he saw Elan appear from the hole. He knew Kili had tried to harm her in the chasm, for the rage was still twisting the Mogmaid's face, and Elan looked ready to fight. Menol would find out later what had happened, but it was enough that she was alive. Now, whatever else happened, he would be ready to deal with it.

When the Merras' voices could no longer be heard, it was as if a spell had broken, and everyone around the chasm was awakened by the fear that still spilled out of that place. Evil surged anew, no longer held back by the

slender creatures and their song. Menol was about to follow Elan and the others when he heard Kili's defiant screeching as she hovered over the chasm.

"I saved her!" Kili yelled to all who could hear her. She spread her arms and gestured toward the departing Merra. "I pulled that silly Merra back from her doom in the pit! She tried to fight me, but I would not let her kill herself." Kili regained her composure and her eyes flashed.

Confused Mogs and Merramogs who still surrounded the hole passed the story through the crowd. For a moment they had been so changed by the courage they had seen in the faces of the Merra, and so touched by the Merramaid whose eyes still echoed the terror of having been in the arms of death, that they had forgotten the dreariness of their own lives. They were lifted by what they had seen, but Kili's lies broke through the inspiration, the coldness returned, and with it the despair of this place.

"I saw it!" Groff called from the platform. "I saw the Mogmaid pull the Merra out by her hair." Menol was astounded by the audacity and distressed to hear the rumble of agreement start in the crowd. Others disagreed, and arguing broke out.

"The Merra was pulling her out of the pit, I looked down, I could see it!" someone shouted.

"Lies," another Mog roared. "I saw the opposite, and everyone here agrees."

Menol looked at Edam and saw the older Mog watching the spectacle with some disgust. The signal was given that the trials were over. Everyone was anxious to be away from this place. In five days, or fewer, the Elders would hand down their decision.

Kili was surrounded by a gathering of cheering admirers. She found Menol and smiled at him with menace and triumph. The other maids who had returned from the pit were comforted by family and teachers as they made their way back to the Caverns.

Arguments continued, for most believed—or wanted to believe—that Kili told the truth. It disgusted Menol, and as he accompanied Edam in the procession, he kept his thoughts to himself. It was clear to him that what he had seen at this Choosing was a small measure of the treachery that had gone on for centuries. So this was how it happened, he thought grimly to himself. Whenever he

looked at life around him and saw how mean it had become, he couldn't help but wonder how it was they had lost so much. Today he had seen. Little by little Mogs forgot, and they went where it was easiest.

Menol looked ahead of him, at Groff's obscene bulk sliding into the towing net so his Mog guards could carry him back to the Caverns. He wondered how anyone would be willing to follow a creature so despicable. But they did. And if Edam and Menol weren't careful, Groff would take it all. And he would start by forcing the other Elders to name Kili Between. How did Mogs like Groff become powerful enough to smother all that was good? When Mogs like me don't stop them, Menol thought. He felt the cold breath from the black hole reach out and enfold his heart.

16

Elan Between



Tia swam directly below Elan, guided through the passages to the garden by the touch of Elan's hands on her shoulders. Elan could feel Tia trembling slightly as the older Merra neared the sacred place. She respected Tia's silence, and knew the reverence she felt. Elan could see the fluctuations in the light ahead that came from the crystal room.

The day before, after their ordeal at the abyss, Elan had traveled a distance with the other Merra. Many of them, their task completed, felt uneasy at the violence that threatened to erupt about the Caverns. Elan thanked them from her heart as they went their own way. She too needed time alone, and the garden would be the best place to assimilate the horrors and wonders of the past several days. Before Elan had taken her leave of Tia, they had made arrangements for Nemu to guide the older Merra to Elan and the garden the following day. Elan wished there were some way to allow all the Merra to come to the garden, but that time would have to wait.

The spice smells intensified as they entered the crystal-line chamber, and Tia turned toward Elan expectantly.

"Are you ready, Tia?" Elan asked, taking her hands to guide her upward to the opening.

"Yes, child, I am ready," Tia said. Elan showed her how to hold her arms and shoulders to squeeze through, and placed Tia's hand just inside the entry hole. Tia was small and slipped in easily. Elan squeezed through and felt the excitement the garden always brought to her. Tia turned in every direction, smelling all the fragrances that drifted on the currents at once.

"Oh, I can feel this place, how ancient it is and all the good in it," Tia said breathlessly.

Elan was silent for a moment, remembering how she had been when she first discovered it. "Do you want to be alone, Tia?" she then asked.

"Oh no! Let's explore everything," the older Merra said. "Most of these growing things were gone long before I was a child, but I have learned of them and perhaps I won't have forgotten everything."

Elan led her through each section, happy to see Tooki come to check on them between his own joyous explorations of his old home.

Tia tasted and touched everything she could. Then Elan led her above to the paintings and mosaics and described them all. They pulled themselves onto the mossy stone beneath the dragons.

Both of them were thoroughly engrossed, and the garden offered them respite from their worries. In the Center Place many thousands still waited for two events. They would learn who had been made Between, and then best of all, they would see her meet the Seadragon. Few had had that honor, and it was the event of a lifetime. Meanwhile, everyone waited.

The Elders' deliberations in the Grand Chamber would go on until the new Between had been chosen. Elan had little hope that they would choose her, but for now, she would do her best to enjoy the garden with Tia.

"When do you think it will be safe to begin telling other Merras about our sanctuary?" Elan asked.

"We need to be careful until we learn what choice the Elders make. We can tell some Merra, slowly, but our trust in others must always be measured against what there is to lose." Tia took a bite from a small yellow fruit.

"The Squid thinks there is still danger. He would not leave me today until I promised I would stay here with you," Elan said.

"There is still terrible danger," Tia said. "Groff is only waiting because even he could not get away with killing you now. Too many have seen you. But if by some miracle you are chosen Between, you can be certain Groff will not let the decision stand. He would find some way for you to die that would look like an accident. Even if they go with the Mogmaid, you are not safe. Groff

knows there is trouble in the Center Place. The Choosing celebration has turned foul because some have the courage to question." Tia ate from another fruit; the small smile at the corner of her mouth was all that said she recognized the long-forgotten flavor.

"But the Merras sang for the first time in centuries," Elan went on, "and that means something. Do you think the Seadragons heard?" she asked.

"Yes, I think the Seadragons know. When the Merras sing, all must listen. And as much good as it did, it could still invite tragedy." Tia sensed Elan's puzzlement. "The Merras need to be more wary than ever. They have hidden themselves in many places, only because bringing notice to ourselves invites danger. Something in the sea changes, but we must not rush into the shark's mouth."

Things in the sea were changing. There had been others who joined the Merras in song, and Elan had at least one ally among the Elders. She knew Menol would try to make the others listen, but she had few illusions about his success. That was why she had begun thinking about what might happen if she were not chosen. She had fought too hard, and she knew she was the true Between, no matter what the Ghrismogs decreed. Since she had seen what Mogs were capable of firsthand, obeying their rules was no longer of any importance to her. Her fear of them, and of what they would do to her for rebelling, was nothing to her after the hole. The continuing disintegration of their lives and the sea was what was frightening. Using mun on the Seadragons was frightening. No matter what was decided by the Ghrismog Elders, Elan could not wait patiently for them to decide her future. She was going to do something about it. Since she had arrived in the garden she had been working on a plan. She had told no one her thoughts yet, though she suspected that the Squid had some inkling. He was probably off hunting somewhere, and Elan wished she had his wisdom to rely on.

She became aware of Tia listening to the intense silence of her thoughts. "I'm not going to let them ruin it," she said.

"You mean if they choose the Mogmaid?" Tia asked.

"They will have to choose Kili. I had hoped for a few dreaming moments that the Balance might make it right, but the Mogs have nearly destroyed the Balance, and

how do we know that fighting them was not intended all along? We certainly know now not to wait for them to do the 'right' thing. Right for them is defined by self-interest." Elan thought again to the chasm and how eagerly Kili had wielded the knife.

"Let me hear what you are thinking," Tia said.

"I am going to take the Seadragons from them," Elan answered, watching Tia's face.

"How?" Tia's sightless eyes widened.

"I don't know how yet, but I will do it after the first meeting—in the Center Place—when the Seadragon comes, I will be there. I will cross-speak with him again and he will know me. I will tell him of my plans and we will go. I will take him someplace where they can never find him. The other Merra will help me guard him. When the shedragon has hatched her eggs, we can direct her to where we wait. I don't know yet, perhaps I will use my luti shell." Elan laid her hand over it at her waist. "The Nemu will make certain no one follows and no harm comes to her or her young. They could even help us find a place where no one will think to look. It's an endless ocean, and if the Seadragons are well, the Balance can be corrected from wherever we are. We will sing to the Seadragons, Tia, you and I. How does that sound?" Elan knew there were many difficulties in the plan, but she was anxious for Tia's approval. She felt flushed with excitement, but Tia was still, and expressionless.

"That is a good plan," she said calmly, "a very good plan. Too dangerous, but that is nothing to you, is it?" She smiled her approval, and Elan hugged her gratefully.

"The Squid will be cunning with the details, and I am certain many Merra will want to help. But there are many who are weary from lives half-lived, and we must be careful because they could be as black of heart as Groff or Kagor." Tia grew pensive a moment, her expression curious. Her face held few secrets, but Elan waited, wondering what she thought at this moment.

"Perhaps it has taken all these centuries for you to come along," Tia said.

"What do you mean?" Elan asked.

"You are a true Merra, and I have told you before that even among them at their most powerful, you would have shone. But there is something more. You are different, Elan. You know what the enemy looks like. You

have an instinct to be wary of them. That is not to say that their ability to be devious has not progressed as substantially as our ability to recognize it—more no doubt. But you are better equipped than any of us to survive.”

“Perhaps it came from having been raised with the Mogs,” Elan remarked.

“Perhaps,” Tia said.

“Well, we will have to do more than survive to save the Seadragons.” Elan was grim again. “Because Kili will use the mun; she’ll do anything the Mogs bid with little concern for the Balance.” She glanced up again at the magnificence of the mosaic, finding it hard to believe anyone could be unaffected by the dragons. But there were many.

“It grows dark so soon.” Tia glanced up toward the fading light, feeling the warmth of it grow weak upon her face. Elan slid from the mossy stone and helped Tia down.

As they swam through the garden to their overhang and their sleepnets, Tia smiled at Elan and said, “I have a plan of my own. Would you like to hear it?”

“What is it?” Elan was curious.

“In this garden you found keys to our past and keys to our future. I don’t need to tell you what the Mogs would do if they found it.” Tia turned to take in all the smells again. “I have heard of a Merra in a distant reach named Issa. She is both a healer and a master of plant lore. She must be the first to know of this garden, and with her help—and the help of any whom she trusts—we must take several of each and every plant that grows here to another hidden cavern. We will re-create this garden, first one, then another, until there are countless numbers of them. Too many for the Mogs to destroy.”

Elan felt a wild joy at hearing this plan. Not only was it sound, but it came from Tia, who had once thought all was lost to the gray Ghrismog world. “It is a fine idea, Tia, fine and brave, and the beginning of what will be a rebirth for the Merra.” She hugged Tia again and helped her into her sleepnet. She swam to the fruit trees to gather another basketful for Tia, who was going to stay in the garden alone. Elan was afraid it might be dangerous for Tia in the Caverns.

This would be Elan’s last night in the garden for some time. She was certain many wondered where she was,

and she wanted no one hunting for her and finding her anywhere near the garden. She would go in the morning to the yellow caves to await the decision of the Elders. The Nemu would take her to the ruins and stay with her, as would the Squid, unwilling to leave her without protection.

Elan hung the basket of fruit near Tia's sleepnet. Tia would have no trouble finding her way around this lush abode, and she would have Tooki to keep her company.

Elan looked up into the night sky through the crescent window. She described for Tia how the twinkling stars stretched and wavered on the pulse of the surge, and soon both Merra drifted closer to their dreams. Elan listened for the calling of the Seadragons, as ever more clear from the garden. She was excited that tomorrow she would meet other Merra. She wondered what they would be like. She had much for which to thank them.

17

The Merra Dance



Menol looked around the Grand Chamber. Several of the Elders were arguing, and all of them had taken on a haggard look after two days together. A subtle change had come over the way Groff interacted with Edam. Even his pretense of deference was missing. Menol was certain there was a new undercurrent of unity between several of the Elders and Groff, and he knew why. It was a vile dance of corruption going on for all to see. Groff had his paid opinion shapers out in numbers telling the story of Kili's bravery throughout the Caverns. Groff had in his favor the Mogs' need to believe what they heard.

And while the lies were spread outside, Groff focused his persuasive energies on the Elders inside the chamber. His work was to sway any of the Elders who were neutral about their vote.

Immediately after the journey back from the chasm, Groff proposed his life-bonding to the daughter of one of the Elders who had always been critical of him. Though this Elder was intelligent, he was also impressed by the limitless holdings Groff claimed. The liaison was attractive to the Elder, if not to the daughter, and the new familial bond was sure to be a factor in the voting. Menol looked around the Grand Chamber and shook his head. The six Elders who ordinarily went with Edam's vote, including Menol himself, had now dwindled to four, maybe fewer. Groff had not stopped his maneuvering for votes at just one Elder. In fact he had begun his plotting even as the procession made its way back to the Center Place. Another of Groff's detractors, Suida, an Elder of whom Menol thought highly, had made a stray comment about an attractive holding of land that belonged to Groff.

They passed through it, and Groff spoke proudly of its warm-water streams, which seeped into the sparkling sands. Groff had offered it to Suida as a gift on the spot. Menol had heard this conversation and fully expected the Mog to reject the offer, but he had underestimated the Elder's greed. Groff's blatant bribe was passed off as an abundance of good feelings brought about by the safe return of his niece from the pit. It was frightening to behold.

The two Elders, who were now richer than they had been, only wondered at their good fortune. And their suspicions, if any were aroused, played little part in their celebrations.

Since the meeting had begun, Groff had dominated the proceedings with incessant praising of his niece. Menol fought repeatedly with his self-control in the face of the lies and the rage they inspired in him.

"I'm sure none of you thought anything besides cunning ran in my family. Not so! Courage and compassion too! I must admit, it even surprised me." Groff smiled like a friendly uncle.

"Groff, sometimes when I listen to you, I feel as if I have wandered into the catacombs," Menol said, and a hush fell over the chamber as Menol mentioned the caves in which the insane were held. "I have heard over and over how your niece saved the Merra. Do you think repeating it will change our memory?"

"I would not have expected otherwise from you, young Menol." Groff smiled. Everyone in the chamber tensed, this being the closest they had come to direct confrontation, and closest to the question many still had in their minds, though none would dare ask.

"The first test was clearly and overwhelmingly the Merra's," Menol said. The agreement was carefully given, and none would look at Groff. "And the second blood-bath had the Merra taking all the risks, holding back what surely would have been disaster. Your niece, less brave than she was clever, did not appear until the circling had slowed and the danger passed. Even then, she was more intent upon making herself visible than in assisting the Merra with her insurmountable task." There was an even greater tension in the room as the Mogs, who had already made up their minds that Kili would be Between, unwillingly heard the truth. "And as far as I am concerned, the hole was nothing but the same drama

from your niece, who everyone knows is entirely Mog, and faced not a small part of the danger the true Merra faced. What mockery is this that the two of you are trying to pull together? And you buy the votes of your fellows blatantly!" Menol turned to the other Elders. "What sort of leaders will we be if we choose a maid for Between who is less than what the Seadragons need?"

"That is an insult I am not forced to listen to, and I will not." Groff rose above the seafloor as far as his bulk would allow him to accentuate his size and anger. "My niece displayed heroic courage and compassion and I will not have her maligned in my presence!" He clutched at his chest as if Menol had threatened him personally and caused him such anguish his very health was threatened. The other Elders watched Groff sympathetically. Menol couldn't believe they would fall for this too. Two days of Groff's lies had weakened them.

"What your niece displayed was her genius for acting. Her family seems to have a gift. I have never seen performances so poorly founded in truth played out so expertly," Menol said. Groff was livid and continued to gasp.

Groff's soon-to-be relation cut in. "See here now, there is no need to get personal about it. The maid Kili had courage to even face the killers or the pit, and her patterns were strong. She is dependable, and from her we will know what to expect. The Merra is far too risky. She could do anything. We wouldn't be safe."

"Can you really be so blind to what happened before your eyes?" Menol yelled at him, at all of them.

"And are you bewitched, fool?" Groff interrupted, his equanimity suddenly returned. "Has that Merra made a jellyfish of your brain? The Merra stopped being useful centuries ago, and they have been a menace the whole time. Of course they are good at patterning fish. They have the same intelligence and the same ambition as fish! Is this the sort of creature you want to control your future?" Groff was rigid.

"I want a future." Menol regained his composure and tried, though he knew it was nearly hopeless, to persuade the Elders one last time. "And I fully believe our existence is in jeopardy unless we make the Merra Between." Menol looked around at the Elders; with the exception of Edam, and one or two of the others, none would meet his eye.

"You have forgotten that there are eggs, and that a Mogmaid Between fostered them." Groff regained his superior tone. Menol heard much agreement.

"It is true there are eggs, but as to who was responsible for them, there is some reason for doubt," Menol said.

"And what new notion have you now? Really, I am tired of this!" Groff raged again, knowing too well that the only ones who could swear differently were dead. He spoke to the other Elders, using his most melodic and persuasive voice.

"When Kili is Between, and shines before us in the Center Place to take her rightful position as companion to the Seadragons, you will see for yourselves she is the best choice. She has all the strength and intelligence necessary to assume that responsibility and to preserve what little there is left of the Balance. Believe me, that is more important to me than anything else. I know in my heart that should we choose the Merra, we will pay dearly. That is all I wish to say." Groff seemed to deflate, and drifted to the bottom with fatigue.

The closed faces of the Elders revealed that they had never intended to choose anyone but the Mogmaid Kili. Menol turned to Edam and saw his resigned look. He knew once again that he was powerless to stop what was about to happen.

When Edam, sounding tired, asked for a show of hands, it was a mere formality. Menol was surprised to see that others of the Elders had not been swayed by Groff's theatrics, and Kili had only won by two votes. Groff quickly noted who voted against him.

Menol knew that for as long as Edam retained control, most of the Elders who had made this decision they knew Edam opposed, would show their good faith by cooperating. Perhaps that would even buy Edam enough time to win back support—at least until the time Groff came up with his final and inescapable plot.

The tenseness in the chamber remained; none congratulated Groff on his good fortune. Either they felt too guilty for their part in it, or they thought their votes had served him well enough. Most were anxious to escape the heavy atmosphere of the Grand Chamber where they had been trapped for so long. They were anxious to join the celebration that was the center point to the Choosing,

and which anticipated the meeting of Between and Seadragons. Neither Menol nor Edam moved from their places, and the others hesitated as well.

"Come now," Groff's new relation-to-be said, perhaps feeling a twinge of guilt, "we have made our decision, and there should be no ill will between us. It will be important for us to show a united front when we are viewed by the populace. I, for one, believe we should keep it private—the results of the vote that is. It will do no good to say who voted which way, or that the vote was close. The population will only have confidence in our decision if they believe we are unanimous in our support of the new Between." He knew too well how ugly the mood was outside, and his fear was getting the better of him.

"Yes, there is a celebration to attend, and eggs to rejoice in," another feebly added, carefully avoiding Menol's glance. "We have all been here long enough." He laughed without mirth.

"Yes, it is no wonder we are all so tense," Groff said happily. "I have no hard feelings and I am ready to celebrate vigorously."

"Be careful," Edam warned, "there are reports of deaths already as a result of this—celebration. It seems to be more of a brawl."

"They will settle into the proper festive mood when they have been given the news," Groff added confidently. Suddenly no one wanted to leave, each wondering how the news they had to deliver would be greeted.

"This session is formally concluded," Edam said wearily with a look at Menol. Menol could bear this company no longer and left the Grand Chamber with Edam. They swam slowly toward Edam's private chambers and Menol sighed deeply.

"Perhaps this will pass, and will not be as bad as we feared," Edam suggested, halfheartedly. "Now that we have seen what we have, my young friend, I think we should do our best, while any power remains to us, to somehow get the Merra involved in the Betweening process. Perhaps they would make regular visits to Kili and the Seadragons."

"Neither Groff nor Kili would allow such an affront to their abilities and power," Menol said, and they both knew he was right. The two Mogs continued on, deep in their own thoughts.

Menol stopped, having reached some decision of his own. "I want to tell Elan, the Merra, that she has not been chosen," he said.

"That is unfair news that I would surely not want to deliver myself," Edam said. "You know where to find her?"

"I think so," Menol replied as they passed beneath the coral paintings of the Seadragons. Menol stared up at them and shook his head. "I feel certain there will be some greater price to pay for this mistake."

"Let us hope not too dear a price," Edam said, staring at his friend. "You will go to her today?"

"Yes, I have heard she stays for the time being in the abandoned Merra caves beyond the Center Place." Menol could see that his words had made Edam nostalgic and sad.

"I used to play there as a child," Edam said. "It is a very beautiful and haunting place. Now I have a better understanding of why." He looked at Menol fondly, knowing the news would be as painful to deliver as it would be to receive. "The Merra ruins will somehow be the appropriate place to tell the true Between she has been rejected."

Menol nodded. Edam watched the young Elder swim away to his difficult task.

As Menol swam through the Center Place, he could see that the news of the new Between was spreading. From the crowd's reaction, it appeared the majority of them agreed, but many did not. Before he had passed the farthest reaches of the Caverns, he had seen at least three fights, and one he had nearly been pulled into.

Menol had no desire to fight. His anger had passed into a quieter, more watchful state. His only concern was that Elan not hear the choice of the Elders from anyone else. He was certain she knew he cared for her, and somehow he hoped that would help soften the blow. He wanted to be with her. He didn't know why, or of what help his presence might be, but he wanted to look upon her face.

The journey out to the Merra caves was shorter than Menol remembered, perhaps because the last time he had been there, he too had been a child. His mother, a Merramog, had been the first one to take him to the ancient city. She told him there was much to learn from

the old walls, and though she had left to look at other caves, Menol remembered feeling no fear alone. His imagination soared, and he remembered one visit when he had found a fragment of a mosaic and had been as excited as if he had been the first and only one to see it.

Menol had gone back to the Merra ruins many times until one day he stopped. It was when he had realized, by the criticism of those around him, that he looked Merra. He had come of an age when he understood what that meant, to be less than a Mog. At that moment Menol had denied anything Merra, and he had been ashamed to go back to the ruins, no matter what his mother told him or how peaceful they made him feel.

The first structures appeared in the distant blue of the water, and the memory washed through him and gave him more solace than he had known for some time. Perhaps he had felt Elan's song before he actually heard it, for moments later the clear notes of her voice surrounded him.

As he swam nearer, he became more enchanted by the gentle melody that meandered on stray currents. He could not yet see her but knew she was near, for the clarity of her voice surrounded him as he followed the sound and waited outside the mouth of a large cavern. Menol did not want it to end. There was a tranquillity in these ruins, in her song, that eclipsed his anger at the Elders and the lies. He closed his eyes and remembered her face. He shuddered at the sight of her disappearing into the abyss and forced that thought away with the anticipation of seeing her again, now, close to him.

Though the song was over, Menol hovered near the rocks and listened to its echoes from the cavern and from within him. When he opened his eyes she was before him, with an amused, but kind smile on her lips. Menol could see the Squid in the shadows behind her.

When Elan first saw him there, looking so weary and melancholy, she wanted to touch his face before he opened his eyes, to see if the sadness would leave him. She knew why he was here, and she knew this could not be easy for him.

"You have come to tell me the Elders have not chosen me as Between?" Elan asked. Menol looked at her and could only nod. He would either have to say nothing or talk the whole day of the lies and manipulations that had

passed in the Grand Chamber. He was silent. He would rather just look at her. "If it had been different news, that would really have been a surprise, wouldn't it?" Elan asked. "You didn't think they would choose differently, did you?"

"I had hoped, for a moment, and I know it should have been you. I am sorry for us, and sorry for the dragons." Menol held her gaze.

"And I believe you," Elan said, allowing herself to be sad with him a moment. The Squid stirred, and Elan caught his look as he swam from the cavern.

"He's leaving you alone with me?" Menol asked, his eyes following the giant creature until the Squid disappeared behind a distant rock formation.

Elan laughed at his innocent surprise. "It means he is entrusting you with my safety," she said, half in jest, for the Squid would not be far away.

"I will never let anything happen to you," Menol said, and Elan felt a flutter inside at the passion that deepened his voice.

"That is a bold promise to make, Menol," she warned him.

"But one I intend to keep," he stated without sentimentality.

Elan started swimming, and Menol fell in gently beside her. They wandered through the ruins, talking of small things because the larger truths would leave them speechless. Occasionally they saw another Merra in the distance. Elan glanced often at him, but Menol kept his eyes forward. She knew his strength could outmatch hers. It was a different kind of power—certain, and with no need to show itself. From the first moment she had seen him at the abyss, Elan had felt the stirring, the vague thrill that passed through her insides. She knew he had had those feelings for her, and she wanted nothing more than to look into his eyes and see the longing in them. But he was careful to keep his feelings hidden. Why? Did he think her too saddened by his news? He didn't know she had another plan to take the Seadragons. Or worse yet, now that he had seen the Choosing, and he believed her to be Between, did he somehow think her too pure to touch? That would be ironic, Elan thought. Everything she had learned of Betweens and Merras past, glorified life and seed and growing and healing. The Merra dance

was a feast of life both enchanting and fierce. Anything but untouchable. Perhaps he simply didn't know how she felt.

"Thank you for coming to tell me yourself," Elan began. "That took courage." There was little more to say, now that the Elders' decision had been made.

"Please don't thank me," Menol said. "Anything but that."

"Perhaps something can still be done," Elan said, thinking of her plan. Menol shook his head pensively, then hazarded a glance at her. Elan thrilled at the look in his face. It was so filled with desire that her heart fluttered. She wanted no more talking, but just to move against him and hold him with all her strength. She waited for a sign, but again he pulled away. Is he so in awe of me? she thought. Does he think a maid willing to face a killer whale would not tremble to be touched by him? She tried tongue telling, and knew she was not wrong about his wanting her.

The more they talked, the more Elan felt consumed by her longing. Not knowing how to draw him out, she instinctively led him to one of the most distant reaches of the Merra ruins. Here she had found a strange and private room, and though she had asked no one about it, she had guessed at least a part of its function in time past. As they swam, her arm brushed against his, and she felt a burning where they had touched. Her sense of arousal heightened as they neared the passage that would lead them to her room, and though she was certain her feelings were shared, she was afraid something else might be keeping him from being taken by them.

To Menol, Elan's radiance and sensuality were at all times so overwhelming that he could not discern her want of him. He knew little of the phenomenon of cross-speaking; that his sudden fierce desire could be coming from her did not occur to him. As far as he knew, she still thought him an enemy, and was merely showing the kindness she would have shown to anyone. It took all of his strength not to crush her mouth, all of her, with this heat he felt. When she brushed against him, and the drifting strands of her hair whispered over his skin, his nerves jumped in answer and waiting.

All of Menol's senses were dimmed in the face of his arousal. He knew they had been swimming a short time

in silence and that the Merra seemed to be leading them somewhere. They followed passages that meandered and separated, bursting with life. Few had passed here, Menol thought, for huge anemones of coral and pink waved their arms like sentinels protecting the way. He didn't wonder where they went; he didn't care. He felt entranced, and clenched his teeth against his desire to take her. They had come to a dark passageway. Elan reached for his hand. He took hers, small and strong in his large hand, and they passed through the narrow crevice. Parts of her body brushed against him in the darkness and Menol thought he heard her breath quicken. Again, another thrill ran through him at the sound, though he attributed it to the darkness and her excitement at their exploring.

At last they entered a small room, which seemed but an extension of Menol's trance. It was dark and as protected as a womb. Soft light came from somewhere, yet there were no openings. Convoluted mounds of deep green velvet moss covered every surface of wall, ceiling, and floor, and reaching into the room from each of the corners, low and high, were moss-covered protrusions.

Menol could feel Elan's nearness and her eyes on him, but so close to uncontrollable were his thoughts that he feared to look at her. What he named hunger, and tried to deaden, was what Elan longed to touch. Menol's attention was caught by a band of colored light near the ceiling. He swam up, hoping for some distraction before he lost control. When he came level with this light Menol fell deeper into his dream, for here before him was a carving in the stone, a relief sculpture depicting the Merra dance. The artwork covered the back wall of an indentation no more than an arm deep, and it ran around the entire room. From behind it, light of rose hues seeped through, illuminating the erotic moments caught in the stone. The light gave the stone a warmth as the sculpture told this dance from start to finish. A lost Merra artist celebrated the joy of that union of flesh and spirit by leaving this mute tribute. Each position of finger, breath, and hip was delicately molded. A reverence for a moment ethereal and unfettered by the darkness of otherworldly troubles. Elan drifted next to him, watching him take in this record of bliss. He put off allowing himself to look at her until he could bear it no longer. In his eyes, he kept no secrets from her, and she fell into his soul.

Elan at last understood in his glance that all the passion she could have dreamed of, burned in him. And what touched her most deeply was his surprise, for he could not mistake what was in her expression, and now knew why she had brought him here. He had had no expectation. Only desire.

Menol reached fiercely for Elan's waist and drew her to him with such force she gasped. As his mouth found hers and seared her with the strength of his longing, his hands grasped her back. He pressed her against him, as if he feared any small part of her would drift away. There came a rhythm to their kissing and touching that entered the length of them, and Elan felt her movements echoed by Menol. He reached for the ridge behind her and pulled until he crushed her against the wall. A surge of pleasure swept through her as she reached around his chest to feel the tautness of his back, and at her breasts felt the pounding of his heart. The bed of moss was soft and cushioned them, and Elan arched her back with all her strength to meet him with equal force. Menol's urgency was at each moment ready to overwhelm them, but Elan paced the dance to follow the peaks and hollows of stormy waves.

As his hips moved over her, she felt the hardness of him burning, but she postponed the instant he would enter her, the moment she ached for. There was more to be had of this dance than the end. Elan pushed them away from the wall into the center of the warm room, where they drifted, weightless. With all motion but their fast breath stilled, she took Menol's hips between her hands and looked down at the magnificence of him and again into his face. She tingled with her unanswered desire to rush into his powerful arms. She let go of him and swam around him once, twice and again, letting her hair fall over him. Then without touching him with her hands, she brushed him with her lips, everywhere but on his mouth. Fluttery kisses, as light as her breath, but their effect was far from gentle, for Menol's skin leaped in answer to them. They drifted about the pillowed room without regard for top or bottom. The intensity with which Menol watched her showed the pleasure she gave him was growing too tumultuous to be met with her light kisses. She swam to face him, staring at his mouth, which parted to taste her.

In a storm of haste, she kissed him so feverishly that teeth cut lips and tongues traced swollen places, their arms tangled in the rush to melt together. With every breath her soft moans escaped and mingled with his, deep and reverberating. They drifted into a corner, and Elan's back pressed into a mossy mound. She reached behind her to find a place to hold as he drew her floating hair away to kiss her mouth and breasts and eyes. Elan was ready to answer this frenzy but Menol would make her wait, and with a pressure perfectly balanced between thrill and pain he bit her. Small delicate biting in places Elan thought could give no pleasure, but found herself writhing and half-delirious, unable to escape his powerful arms. Soft shocks leaped through her as he found smooth skin at the curve of her hip, in the crook of her neck, and played upon her with his teeth and tongue.

He stopped suddenly, and Elan found herself nearly weeping. When she opened her eyes, he was hovering above her. There was so much love for her in his eyes that her breath stopped. Now they would blend, they would fuse this heat that burst in them separately into a single dance of perfection. With their breath blending and building again, Elan whispered, "Please, yes," and cried out as he came into her. The longing answered, and begun. All the while their eyes searched the deepest part of the other's being. No secrets, no other world but this.

Menol pushed against the low wall behind them, and they drifted. He felt himself swallowed in the warmth of her, gliding at first gently, then with more force. Elan smothered her cries of pleasure in his mouth over hers; her urgency overpowered the gentleness with impassioned need. With all his strength, he pulled the small of her back toward him and followed the rhythm of her quickening dance. They swirled about the room with no awareness beyond this fierce pleasure. The force of their movements sent them glancing off one wall then another, a storm gaining force, and Elan felt a moment of breathless stillness at whose edges loomed an encroaching white heat. It crashed over her and she cried out and held Menol as a moss clings to rock.

Moments later, her every nerve alive with awareness, Elan felt Menol thrust once, twice, and finally moan nearly soundlessly. His voice, his breath escaping next to her cheek, the dance she felt him do involuntarily inside

her, brought her another wave of exquisite pleasure that left them spent together and drifting toward the mossy floor. They lay like statues in this ancient Merra room of pleasure. They held on with a desire that denied the future they both knew awaited them, one far from this place and devoid of moments like this. Menol stroked her hair, and Elan traced his shoulders and chest with her fingertips. They slept like children.

Much later Elan awoke and sent the Squid a cross-speak message that she was safe, and happy. She watched Menol sleeping for some time, and cried at the sweetness he had let her know. She wanted no secrets from him and longed to tell him of her plan to take the Seadragons. She thought he would approve, but telling him still frightened her. She pressed it from her mind and wrapped herself around him again and listened to his heart beat. In sleep he reached his arms about her and Elan marveled at how warm this felt to her, to be loved and held. She felt new stirrings to do the dance just thinking of him, knowing it was greedy to sit to a full meal and want more so soon, but it was not hers to control. She simply stared at him with no thoughts of waking him, but he stirred and stretched, and when he came back to her, his face nuzzled at her breast, his lips just brushing the nipple.

Elan tried to move him as she felt her arousal build, but he seemed to sleep heavily, though his hands moved over the small of her back. He was molding her in his dreams, his long fingers gliding over her stomach and hips. Elan could at last bear the tension no more, and every time she managed to move one hand he found her with the other. Finally she began to suspect it was a game and he laughed and opened his eyes wide. He had not been sleeping and had felt her watching him. He stared at every part of her until the laughter in his eyes changed to hunger and Elan thrilled that they would begin again. She had no concept of time or day; all she knew was that this could be the only time she would ever have him, and she wanted him until she was exhausted.

18

Violence and Tragedy



Soon after Kili was notified that she had been chosen Between, she was moved into her new chambers. They were exquisite, and suited her position. She had attendants and guards, and every luxury she could want, but for one.

A few of the Elders came to pay her homage, but she hurried them out and sent one of her attendants to fetch Menol. She could not wait to see him, and if he would not come willingly, she would force him. She wanted to break him, and his pride, and while she waited, she made herself more beautiful. She had never felt so excited.

On one wall of her chamber was a mirror, and mirrors were treasure. They were found objects, always from the wrecks of split-tailed ships. This one was large, and true, and must have cost dearly. She admired her beauty, pulling the floating hair from her shoulders. She took a sealed mollusk shell; in it artisans had made a dye of deep purple. Ground pearls made it iridescent, and thinking of Menol, she used her fingertips to trace a tattoolike pattern that began at her throat and circled one breast. She was nearly finished when her attendant returned, claiming to be unable to find Menol.

"You are stupid! And inept! I can see that you have no fondness for this job. Send another in as you leave, one who is able to fulfill a simple command given by the Between!" Kili liked how that sounded. The attendant left, shattered, and she amused herself trying on capes of seal and otter. She quickly grew tired of dressing up as the afternoon passed, and when the next attendant returned without Menol, Kili's impatience blossomed to fury.

"He was sighted swimming for the Merra ruins? Did you have the ruins searched?" Kili screamed.

"Yes, Sabat, yes, Between, I sent all but one of your guards to look for him, and they questioned many Merra. But he is nowhere."

"No one is nowhere! Everyone is somewhere! What good is my power if I have no one to order about?" Kili swam erratically from one end of her chamber to the other. She yanked the pearls from her hair; the string tore and the white beads drifted to the sandy floor. "Send for Groff!" Kili watched her attendant rush from her rooms. Groff had many spies. One of them must know Menol's whereabouts. "If he is with that Merra, I swear I will have them both killed. Za. Yes, Za will avenge my humiliation." Kili waited. She stared about her chambers and swam to the floor to pick up several of the large pearls.

She swam to face the mirror and placed one of the pearls on her tongue. She drew it in her mouth and swallowed it.

"Now I am a treasure, outside and in." She smiled at her reflection and did a swaying dance for herself. She was lost in this amusement and spun as her attendant announced himself.

"Between, no one can find Groff. He is not in his living cave, nor is he in the Grand Chamber." His head was downcast, but it did not stop Kili from throwing a stone at him.

"Where is everyone? The Between will not be ignored!" Kili shrieked. The attendant bowed and started to swim away. "I did not give you permission to leave!" The attendant returned, and Kili's eyes blazed at him a moment. "Get out!" It seemed she could hear the echoes of her scream a long time after the attendant left. She swam about her chamber, talking out loud.

"He is with that Merra, I know it. I will have them killed. Tortured and killed. And where is Groff? I need him for one small thing, and one would think that he might be able to be here, to help me, but no, he's off on one of his secret missions, no doubt. I must have spies of my own. I can't rely on Groff, that will not do." Kili was startled from her musings. A young guard entered to make certain the new Between had all she needed. Kili

was about to send him away until she saw how handsome he was.

Groff hated going anywhere alone. He felt exposed and vulnerable. He had found a way to inspire fear in all who knew him, and this he could do because at every moment there were any number of greedy and trusted Mogs who would do whatever he commanded. But he himself? Alone? He was no match for any lunatic determined enough to kill him. There were many who would like to, but few foolish enough to face the consequences. Knowing this, however, did little to calm his fears.

Now he found himself in a series of darkened chambers and passages, on his way to meet with Kagor. As always, these meetings had to be carefully arranged. Each time they met in a different location, always at Kagor's choosing.

There was a delicate maneuvering for power between Groff and Kagor. The old Mog knew if Kagor wanted to, he could have his sharks shred him in moments. Why didn't he?

It was so dark in these passages. Groff was certain that was why his thoughts turned to gloom. For some reason, he thought of a day, perhaps fifty winters before, when he had taken a Merra against her will. He had asked her to train a Mogmaid for Between, and she had refused. It was her dignity that had offended him, so he had had to humiliate her. None would call that a Merra dance. She had fought him so violently that he had to have four guards hold her as he pushed himself into her. She was serenely quiet then, and he hated her, for she would not let him feel victorious.

Forcing maids was not new to Groff, but learning she had conceived by him was. Groff pondered the memory and thought of the hunter Kagor, who waited for him at the end of this wheezing journey. He wondered if the violent way the Merra had been taken had planted a seed within the seed that grew in her womb. He wondered if her disgust and loathing had grown in there too, for the outcome of this was a stranger to them all. It was Kagor.

Groff had never been able to use the word "son" with Kagor without feeling frightened. There was not the slightest glint of feeling in Kagor, even as a child. He was

intelligent and driven, but nothing living grew close to him. Everyone was afraid of him—his Merramog servants, his teachers, and even the hunters with whom he spent all his time.

The Merra, when she learned she would bear a child, had gone to a Merra healer to lose it. Groff had caught her in time and had held her prisoner, and she had become so docile that the guard was lessened. But shortly before the birth, she escaped.

She had gone to a distant reach, and it had taken Groff nearly three winters to find her and the child. Perhaps she thought Groff would forget. It wasn't that he wanted her, or even a child; it was simply that no one would make a fool of him, or have what he might want.

The guards who found her had been under order to kill her in the way that Groff had specified. She was to be blinded with urchin spines and left to wander in the open sea until some predator had her. Groff reasoned that this would give her time to ponder the grief she had given him before she died.

Groff had taken the young Merramog, whom the mother had named Gareth, and changed his name to Kagor. As soon as the child was old enough to ask about the mother of whom he had the vaguest memories, it was repeated often to him that she had taken a fancy to a large pearl a guard carried and had traded her son for it. One of the only presents Groff ever gave the child was a large pearl. Groff had remarked that it was very much like the one his guard had given to Kagor's mother. He often wondered if Kagor still kept the pearl in the small pouch at his waist.

Shortly after he had given this gift Groff learned that the Merra had not died, that somehow she had found her way to help and, in fact, lived within these very Caverns. Groff remembered wondering why she had been so foolish. Perhaps she was looking for the child. She would find him so changed that she could not call him her own, even if she might hold him at her mother's breast. Nothing about him was like the child Groff had been brought. Groff made certain of that.

At first he had thought that this child would be an alter ego. One trained to kill, one with no other purpose than to protect Groff and further both of their interests. Groff

had mistakenly counted on being able to fashion the child's loyalty as well. As Groff came to learn, Kagor had loyalty to no one.

Groff had considered having the Merra killed, but his spies told him she was nearly mute, so he had allowed her to live. That day at the hole, when she led the singing Merras, Groff knew his kindness had been a mistake.

Breathing with difficulty and stopping often, he approached the chamber in which Kagor waited. He wondered, as he had countless times before, what made Kagor do what Groff asked. Kagor had wealth, though he seemed to care little for it. Was it because he enjoyed killing as perversely as many said he did? Groff certainly gave him ample opportunity to practice his art, and to profit by it too.

This purposelessness frightened Groff as much as anything about Kagor. Groff knew why he himself must have power, because he had nothing else. It was a salve to his loneliness in a way his wealth was not. But to have no desires, no plans? Groff could not understand this. But it mattered little. As long as Kagor continued to do what was asked of him.

Groff entered the chamber. He thought his eyes would be accustomed to the darkness from the passages, but it took some time for him to make out the dimensions of this room and its inhabitants. Groff heard the sharks before he saw them, and though he knew they would be there, they still left him uneasy. As always, he had had to consent to come to this meeting without his special guard, but Kagor refused to leave his sharks behind. Nor had Groff asked him after the first time. Groff looked at it as a concession he must make in order to have what he wanted in the long run. The whooshing of the dead-eyed creatures so near him made his belly churn with fear, but he hoped his being there alone would speak in some way of his trust (which of course he had not one shred of) and perhaps of his courage. Considering the state of his bowels, his courage was no more than stupidity head-to-head with no other choice.

Trying not to be too distracted by the constant circling of the sharks, Groff wasted no time. He had something he wanted of Kagor, and the sooner he drew out his plan, the sooner he could be gone from this hideous place.

* * *

Elan and Menol knew the time drew near when they would have to part. In several days the last event of the Choosing would take place, when the Between would meet the Seadragon. In a ceremony intricate with tradition, the new Between was passed symbolic tokens of her duties by the former Between, and with each relinquishment came a dissolving of the old Between's responsibilities. Before that moment, however, Menol had much to prepare for. He was certain Edam and others would be growing concerned about his absence.

The Squid, informed by Elan of her safety, had used his time to hunt, and the Nemu left again on a distant errand for Tia, one to do with the garden. They had been satisfied to leave her in the protection of Menol only because both were so well hidden within the walls of the old Merra city.

Looking into Menol's face on the morning of their last day together, Elan knew she would never have a secret she could not tell him. It made her feel more at ease to tell him all. She told him that Groff had a secret plan to use mun on the Seadragons, and how she had learned of it. The moment he heard it, Menol knew it was true. That explained the uneasiness Menol and Edam had felt, knowing a new threat loomed on the current. Elan still was not certain how Menol would accept the news that she planned to take the Seadragons, but she knew he loved her and would not try to stop her. She watched his face as she told him of her plan; she watched each change in it as he absorbed the details. In the long silence that followed, Elan could not discern his thoughts. When he saw her look of concern, he took her in his arms and began thinking out loud.

It was not as she had feared. He had no criticism, but was, in fact, going over the plan in his mind, following every segment, placing each danger he knew she would face, and sorting out solutions. Then he made some suggestions for change, becoming more excited as he spoke. It could work. He kissed the palms of her hands and looked at her with awe.

"Only a true Between would have thought of such a plan," Menol said proudly.

"What is a Between without a Seadragon?" Elan asked. "And then there are the eggs."

"We will help them my love, we will." Menol brushed her hair back and thought another moment. "I want to help you. There are things I can find out that will aid your plan, and we haven't much time left."

"Could you find out where the shedragon sits her nest? Who knows where? Groff doesn't, does he?"

"Groff shouldn't know, but he may. Only Edam, and some of the special guards are supposed to know the location."

"Because if the Squid can go to her while the Seadragon meets Kili, we can have the shedragon protected by as many Merra as we can find. Because once we take the Seadragon, no doubt the Ghrismogs would hold the shedragon and her eggs hostage, and even threaten them should we not return the male."

"That is exactly what they would do." Menol thought longer. "There are guards who remain with the Between even after the escort takes them back into the open sea. No doubt Kili will keep more guards than she needs for her own amusement. I can find out their numbers, and it's possible I can bring a contingent of guards I trust to overtake them. Kili will think I am there for other reasons and she will not realize, at least at first." Elan caught Menol's odd tone and suspected what he meant.

"But what about Edam? What will he do if you leave him? How will he keep Groff from taking over?" Elan could see Menol was troubled.

"I'm not going to tell Edam unless I must, until it is finished. Sometimes the decisions one must make as leader are not the ones one knows are right. At the outset we will simply appear to be lawbreakers, and Edam would be forced to deal with us in that manner. If we don't force him to play by the rules that bind him, he will be able to congratulate us later on a good plan. And this I am sure he will do."

"There is no way for us to take the dragons and for you to remain as Elder?" Elan asked. "Because there are many good in the Caverns. I hate the thought of leaving them in Groff's hands."

"As do I," Menol agreed, "but I must tell you, I have no love of being Elder, Elan. If this changes your thought of me, then so it must be. I stay out of duty. The power that comes with it I find to be a tainting poison. I have no

desire to spend my life in closed places, bickering over sublime insignificance and watching the greedy maneuver the mindless. I will do what I must, and then I want away."

He looked at Elan and smiled at her watchful expression. He had lost himself in old angers, so at peace was he to tell it for the first time to someone who cared about him. "Don't worry." He smiled at her again. "We will not leave them in the hands of Groff. We will find some solution. But to do that, we have much to make ready." He suddenly took her and kissed her hungrily. Elan felt her breath escape in surprise and excitement. Menol held Elan close to him, both of them dreading the moment they would part. Though they were isolated in their room, and comforted by the new love they had discovered in each other, both were aware of the tensions that built beyond their ruins.

While they had been gone there had been violence in the Center Place between those who were truthful about what they had seen at the Choosing and those who were desperate not to have a change in the power structure. Elan would have been amazed to have heard herself discussed in so many corners of the Caverns, and at her small but loyal following among much of the populace. The Merra, many fearing for their safety, had disappeared into other more distant holds.

Elan and Menol recognized that the moment had come, and they swam hand in hand from the room of the Merra dance. Some Merra greeted them, and the Nemu and the Squid had returned from their tasks to become once again Elan's protectors.

Elan's heart closed as she watched Menol swim back toward the Caverns. They would not see each other until the day of the Seadragon's coming, and after that, who knew when they could be together again?

She turned to the Squid and the Nemu, but needed to say nothing about her happiness or her love for Menol. That she trusted him was enough for them, and when she told them of his intention to help them with their plan, they felt as Elan did, that the chances of their succeeding improved.

The day had arrived. Elan could feel the Seadragon's

nearness. She had been so busy with her tasks that she had had little time to miss Menol. She was glad for all there was to do and pleased that all was in readiness.

Menol had learned of the shedragon's location on the nest. She was far away, so the Squid had left the previous day. He had half the sea to travel, and though cross-speaking from that distance would be difficult, he would let Elan and Tia know as soon as he had arrived there. There were Merra en route as well; that part of the plan Elan considered the least hazardous. The guard around the shedragon was light, and the Between had accompanied the Seadragon to the Caverns.

The most dangerous part of the plan had been Menol's. He had learned of a faction of the guard that had openly spoken out against Groff. Most of them had been present both at the fight between the killer whales and at the hole, and many of them were Mogs who had survived battles themselves. They had seen Elan's courage and had professed their loyalty to the Merra. These Mogs Menol had sought out, and though both he and Elan knew the dangers of trusting near strangers with even the barest details of their plot, they had little choice. The Mog guards would be needed once Elan made contact with the Seadragon. No Merra were trained in fighting Mogs.

With Tia, Elan had gone over each aspect of the plan. Tia had hoped there might be a way to find the Seadragon away from the Caverns, that it would be safer. But grim information kept the plan as it was. Nemu had learned that Kagor was employed to guard the Seadragon until the meeting with the new Between. The Seadragon would not be free of Kagor and his sharks until he arrived at the Caverns. When Elan could see the Seadragon, and he his true Between, then the message would be sure and private. Even with the thousands who would be watching, she would tell him her plan.

At last the moment arrived, and Elan, with Tia and Nemu, made her way to the Center Place.

There was a majesty about the arena for the final day of the Choosing. The pageantry due this day in full display. Giant purple and gold sea fans lined the perimeter of the white sand circle, and all of them swayed on the currents. Huge starfish of reds and oranges were

scattered about the lower walls like stars in the heavens. Many of the Mog guards wore breastplates of tightly woven weaving and shells and lined up their spears in symmetrical rows. Elan was struck by the regal dignity and the numbers of Mogs and Merramogs present. Tia and Nemu told her there had been as many to watch her at the trials, but Elan had little memory of that day.

Scattered at regular intervals were Merramogs proficient in cross-speaking. When the dragon spoke with Kili, the message would be relayed to the crowds. This was very important to many of the spectators, who considered the first words of the Seadragons a portent of the future. Elan did not doubt the Merramogs would not hesitate to lie to the crowds if the message was not one to suit them.

Elan and the others waited in an area off to the side, nearly hidden from the arena. All knew this side of the arena was where the Seadragon entered. That was why Elan positioned herself here, hoping to speak with the Seadragon as he passed above her. She could speak to him as well from across the vast arena, but Elan and Tia agreed, as did the few other Merra who were told, that it would be best if Elan were seen by the Seadragon. No doubt the dragon had been betrayed by the Ghrismogs on many occasions and would be wary of tricks. Elan wanted the Seadragon to know she was his true Between and would protect him despite the trickery that would be played out for him this day. Elan felt prepared, but there was a strange taste upon the water.

The tension of the crowd built. There had been, and continued to be, an ugly atmosphere. Elan felt fear about their plan and wondered if she imagined more jeopardy than there was, because of this shadow that seemed to loom over everything and reach into every heart.

An occasional spectator passed Elan; many who recognized her were nearly reverent. There were more who could not get away from her fast enough.

She tried to combat her nervousness, running through the plan again in her mind. The Squid would meet the shedragon and would frighten away the few guards she had protecting her. The Squid and the shedragon would transport the eggs as far away as possible before the eggs grew dangerously cold. They were near to hatching, and all care would have to be taken.

Elan would advise the Seadragon of their plans, and after the Between and her retinue of guards left the area, she would follow secretly, as would Menol and the guards he trusted. When they were far enough away, Menol would advise the guards that the Elders had sent replacements, and should there be trouble, there would be a fight. Kili would be, forcibly no doubt, escorted back to the Caverns. Once Menol and his guards had taken over, Elan would assume her position as Between and with Menol and the guards, take the Seadragon to meet the Squid and the shedragon. They would be pursued, no doubt, and all would depend on how quickly the shedragon could travel. Menol and his guards would have many battles. Elan knew that as many Merra who knew of the journey would join in the fight. But eventually they would get far enough away to be lost in the endless sea. The Nemu, his bags filled with healing plants from the garden, would accompany Elan, so she could tend to her charges. And meanwhile, Tia was carefully contacting Merra she trusted to begin work on transplanting the garden. All was as ready as it could be.

Elan felt her love for Menol warm within her. She knew the dangers he was facing to help her in this. She rose and was able to see him above the platform with the other Elders. Groff was visible too, and even from this distance she was afraid of him. She had already come too close to his traps—Kagor and his blues, the treachery in the hole. Menol had told her Groff had a network of spies in the Center Place who informed him of nearly all that transpired. Elan had had to fight Menol on one point of the plan. He wanted his most trusted guards near her for this meeting between Kili and the Seadragon, for he would be too far away. But Elan feared it would draw too much attention to her and arouse suspicion. She hoped, for all of them, that this once, the Balance would protect this moment and allow her to take the Seadragons into her care. Elan saw Groff's arrogance from afar. No wonder, she thought. Soon he would be closer to ultimate control, with a niece for Between. But she would not be Between for long.

As room around the Center Place began to grow scarce with the massive crowd, Elan felt more and more close in around her. Many stared, and she felt less than comfortable.

"It's the Merra!" A spectator and his friends stopped as they were about to pass her.

"The one who should be meeting the Seadragon today," another said. A shrill scream came from a nearby cluster of rocks.

"The one-who-bleeds-but-does-not-die warned of this Merra in his teachings. Beware!" A small skirmish broke out, and more guards than Elan might have hoped for arrived to break it up. Though to them, nothing would appear amiss as she was cross-speaking, Elan was certain that as the Seadragon passed, they would be watching her closely. She thought they watched her overly closely already, but suddenly everyone was distracted by conch horns, signaling Kili's entrance into the center circle. Elan looked around again at the thousands in attendance and could feel their expectation.

When Kili appeared from an entry tunnel, there was a murmuring from the crowd. Whether it was at her finery or because they thought her an imposter, Elan did not know. It was very apparent that Kili was in her glory, and she made an entrance befitting her new position of power. She wore a long flowing cape of otter skins. The clasps were of white mother-of-pearl, and several strands of huge soft pink pearls circled the crown of her head. Kili's black hair floated freely about her, and she swam nearly upright to a location in the center of the circle where she would face the Seadragon. The crowd hushed in anticipation. Soon the dragon would be led in, and all present, whether they believed in the Balance or not, knew that seeing the Seadragons was a rare privilege. A moment never forgotten. All of Elan's trepidation was lost as she too waited for the magnificent sight.

There was an abrupt and palpable change in the sea; the Seadragon was near. Everyone turned to stare at a spot over the rim of the Center Place. Elan was so intent upon the thrill of seeing the Seadragon that she did not notice more guards arrive, and several netters, their large nets draped over their arms. Some of these glanced nervously from Elan to the other side of the arena. Nemu saw them and was the first to know there was trouble. Elan heard the startled exclamations of thousands in the crowd. Though she could not see what was happening, Tia knew by Nemu's thoughts.

<Something has gone wrong,> she cross-spoke. Elan first saw the guards had increased and watched her nervously, then she looked up in the opposite direction to see why the crowd was startled. The Seadragon entered from the other side.

<Groff knows,> Elan cross-spoke urgently to Tia and Nemu. Her first thought was for Menol.

<This Nemu, Elan to safety take,> Nemu cross-spoke, eyeing the guards and their weapons warily. What he liked least was the netters and their nets.

<No, Nemu be careful, too many have weapons on you—there may still be a way to cross-speak with the Seadragon from here.>

<You should go while you can,> Tia agreed with Nemu. <It is lost here. If you are free, there is a chance you can find the dragon later.>

Elan tried to keep the alarm from her face. Her mind raced for a solution to this disaster. How much of their plan had been discovered? Would it be impossible for her to swim to the other side of the Center Place, nearer to the Seadragon, so he could see her? Would the guards restrain her or simply follow her? Elan felt her heart pounding. With the many thousands present, she should have been more easily missed. Better this moment than facing Kagor, who was guard to the dragon. But now the fingers of the trap closed around her. Should she have waited until the only ones to battle were Kili and a few guards? No, they might have used the mun before she could take the Seadragon. Tia, feeling the same fears, reached for Elan. Elan laid a calming hand on the Nemu and felt that he was tense in readiness for battle. She would not risk their lives by fleeing. Elan swam up slightly to see the Seadragon more clearly, and as she did, several of the guards lunged toward her. Elan knew that they must be waiting for some signal.

She could see the Seadragon now; though he was far from them, his massive size was awesome. The ancient creature came nearer the edge of the arena, still high above them. He moved as slowly as a dream, his giant limbs so heavy they seemed to take forever to draw through the deep blue water. As the length of the giant began to pass directly over the crowd, the sun and all light from above was blocked and an ominous shadow

crept over the Center Place. There were many who found their expectations far surpassed by this vision of a magic age long past, and they were unable to contain their gasps of alarm. This rush of sound swept over the crowd, with all the power of a wave upon the shore, felt rather than heard. Elan found herself forgetting her own danger as she looked up at this Seadragon beyond imagining. When she had seen him and his mate before she had been in a fever, and had no memory of this magnitude.

His long pale underside was an armor of overlapping scales. His muscular legs and long talons stroked the water beneath him, coming near the crowd. The sight was too much for some of the fainthearted, and Elan heard several screaming. His scales darkened and grew smaller along his sides, blending up to the ridge of bone fins along his spine. His long tail churned slowly from side to side, sweeping the entire width of the arena. His massive head turned first one way, then another. The scales around his eyes were more varied in shape and color, and glistened like polished shell. His nostrils flared and his powerful jaws lined with rows of ivory teeth opened and closed repeatedly. Along the crown of his head were scaled or bone protrusions, like horns. Someone had draped garlands around them, and somehow they looked pitiful as they fell near the dragon's eyes, which were partly veiled to protect the timid from a vision in them of wisdom and weariness. Through the rising panic of their own close danger and her concern for Menol, Elan was suddenly and mortally aware of something else askew. She gasped, and Tia cried out simultaneously. What was it?

The Seadragon stopped at last over Kili, and Elan saw that his color was odd. It was the same mottled and sandy hue the Squid wore when he was suspicious and verging on anger. Elan gripped Tia's hand more tightly.

<Oh Tia, something is terribly wrong, and I don't know what it is.> It was the most frightened Elan had ever felt. One look at Tia, and Elan knew she felt it too. Kili was about to start a song of welcome, and Elan closed her eyes, ready to cross-speak with all her concentration to the Seadragon, when suddenly a wave of nausea swept over her and she choked, opening her eyes to see living horror before her.

Black onyx eyes pierced her heart, and the half smile paralyzed her. At the same moment Kagor appeared, his blues circled, scattering the nearby crowd in fear. Nemu was trapped by four netters. The dolphin struggled a moment, then was still, caught in their webbing. Tia cross-spoke with him to keep him calm. Elan knew that if she tried to flee, thirteen blues would tear her apart, and Tia and her Nemu. She blocked her mind so Kagor could not cross-speak with her. What unspeakable terror to hold his black voice within her. He laughed.

"So the little Merra has discovered secrets," Kagor said half to her, half to his circling blue sharks. He tried to reach for her shoulder to touch the white round scar he had marked her with so long ago, but Elan pulled away from him. "Our golden-haired Merra has become fair game, hasn't she? We knew if we were patient she would give us good sport one day—isn't that right, my handmaidens?" Elan felt sick at the way he cooed to the killing beasts, and she laid her hand across her knife handle.

"Your blade will do you little good. As you cut the one beast, another will have your arm." Kagor smiled. Elan was aware that Mogs around them watched in horror, but none would interfere. A puzzling realization quieted Elan's fears, only to reawaken them doubled. As much as she feared him, Kagor and his sharks had not been the danger she had sensed; another, greater threat, still loomed. Kagor studied Elan, and she forced herself to hold his gaze. She felt her nausea rising again, but both of them were suddenly distracted by the sound of Kili's song. Elan recognized it immediately; it was the homage song, and how different it sounded from Kili's lips.

"It is only fitting that you should hear your imposter sing to the dragon who should be yours," Kagor said to Elan.

"What are you? Why do you threaten me?" Elan asked, and felt Tia's hand tighten in fear around hers. Tia's voice quaked through Elan in cross-speak. <I know him.> Elan looked at Tia, who was white, and seemed close to death. All who heard Kagor's voice felt sickness rise in their throats. Elan held Tia and forced herself to look upon Kagor.

"I can hear in your question that you have some expect-

tation of me. You need understand only one thing, that nothing is sacred to me. And you need know only one thing, that first there is life, and then there is no life, Merra," Elan felt torn in two. First by this present danger, this death waiting for her, and second by a nameless dread of something terrible about to happen—the Balance threatening to collapse within itself. There were some in the crowd who felt it too. Screams interrupted Kili's song. Even Kagor wore a frown as he continued to watch her, aware that something beyond them was threatening.

"What is it?" Kagor demanded. Elan looked past him toward the Seadragon and grew pale as she recognized the colors of his rage. "What do you see!" Kagor grew more furious at Elan's refusal to explain this threat that all could feel. Elan was swept up on this wave of rage and started toward the Seadragon in a half trance. Kagor had a knife to her throat in an instant. Elan heard him bark an order at a nearby netter.

"Bring your net and bind her," he screamed. Tia cried out, and the Nemu struggled to free himself. The netter refused, and before he had time to protest, Kagor's blue swept by and tore his head from his shoulders. Kagor yanked the net from the death grip of the netter, and his blues held all from moving.

There were more screams from the crowd as Elan was trapped within the knotted prison Kagor threw over her. A thunderously loud rumble filled the arena with warning, and all heads snapped toward the Seadragon.

<Where is the Merra?> the Seadragon asked, his cross-speak voice not aimed at one, but at all who could understand him. His words, and the confusion, spread through the crowd like a tidal wave.

<Where is the Merra?> The majestic dragon tossed his head angrily at the screams he heard beneath him, and still the Merra he knew existed did not appear. There was a panic, and a few who knew the extent of their danger tried to flee. Kili was paralyzed in the shadow of the great beast's talons. Suddenly there was a roar that split the sea. The dragon threw back his head and emitted a terrifying wall of sound. It carried the rage of all the centuries of treachery suffered at the hands of the Ghrismogs. It was a deadly wail full of anguish and

pent-up ferocity. Elan's danger was communicated to him and intensified his fury. The Seadragon began to churn the water beneath him and kicked out at the Caverns of stone, and at the thousands who fled. This lie would be the Ghrismogs' last.

Bodies were whipped through the raging currents. The Seadragon began thrashing, as if he were a small creature trapped in a tide pool instead of the giant that he was. The outrage grew to frenzy, and hundreds who had come to celebrate were dying, their broken bodies suddenly drifting calmly away from the holocaust.

Elan shared part of her soul with the Seadragon, and knew the echoed rage. She tore at the webbing that trapped her and felt the coarse knots cut into her skin. Kagor was strangely fascinated by the disaster, the dragon's wrath still somewhat distant from them, but Elan felt herself dying inside from the Seadragon's desire to destroy all, and to destroy himself. Elan's terror blocked her voice, and the dragon was beyond hearing. Elan squirmed until she was high enough to see, and there at the far end of the Center Place lay the ruins of the Elders' platform. Had Menol been killed? She tried to reach her knife, but her arms were pinned.

Elan felt her rage alone would draw the dragon to them, and it did, for toward them he writhed. Waves of purple and red flashed over his scales as his talons smashed at the Caverns beneath him. The ground shook as caves collapsed, and far down in the depths of the Caverns the weight of collapsed rock brought more disaster and ruin. As the dragon drew nearer, Kagor tried to drag Elan toward a crevice.

"No!" Elan screamed. "Let me go, I have to stop him, let me go!" Elan was twisted by her own rage as well as the dragon's. Suddenly a new and different wave of horror swept through her and chilled her heart. Elan drifted blind a moment and a scream drew up and out of her—"No! *No!*"—and pierced every quaking heart. The Seadragon's bellow overlapped as both recognized some tragedy beyond the horror they lived. Somewhere distant in the open sea a frenzy played out in tandem with the Seadragon's. Elan struggled to be free from the net, with only the vaguest realization, through the madness, of what transpired around her.

Appearing from the edge of the crowd of Mogs came Thon, his sons on either side of him. All in the same moment, Thon's sons, aided by two netters, trapped six of Kagor's blues in nets. The beasts tore at the webbing, which would not hold them for long.

Thon rushed at Kagor, whose attention was riveted upon the dragon, and took him by surprise, cutting him across the chest. Thon slashed a hole in Elan's net large enough for her to escape. "Between for your Seadragon, daughter!" he yelled. A shark passed Thon, and bit fiercely into his arm. Thon stabbed at its belly, but the beast would not let go, though its insides streamed red across the water. Elan took her blade and aimed through the shark's eye and into its small brain. The shark drifted to the bottom, and Thon, his blade in his good hand, charged once again at Kagor, who called on his remaining blues. Elan freed Nemu, who raced at a shark that followed her as she swam toward the rampaging Seadragon.

Those not dying, or hunting for the dead or fleeing for their lives, watched what followed almost against their wills. Those who could not avert their eyes could savor life all the more for watching the ease with which it could be extinguished.

Elan swam up to the Seadragon, fighting the churning currents to reach his head and ears. The screams of the dying, the thunderous collapse of the Caverns, and the roaring of the Seadragon were deafening. As he thrashed violently, the dragon lived within his own torment, and what followed was a strange and sorrowful accident, though perhaps not so strange that the dying Seadragon should take his Between with him. Just as Elan reached the height of his massive head, the dragon flung back his neck, and a horn near his brow caught Elan by the hair. She tried to free herself but the ferocity of his movements tangled her more, caught in the lengths of her own hair and in the ropes of garlands. She was imprisoned there, her back pressed against the scales of his jaw. Elan reached up and held on to the horn so her neck would not snap, but in the violence of his twisting she was flung about, and she felt herself breaking, heard bones snapping. She knew by her dream state that the danger song arose in her quaking throat. To all below there was no sound but the roaring, but imprisoned as she was near

the dragon's ear, her voice reached through the madness. She sang, she was *Between*.

The first sign of his calming was a slight color change, and the tearing of his talons slowed. The last rumbles of crushed and falling caverns faded on the currents, and the roaring of the Seadragon became less frequent. Now his bellows were changed, less angry and more sorrowful. Above this sound, and above the constant whisper of crying, came the sound of Elan's voice. A clear melancholy chiming. The chant drifted out on the currents and, like a light, pierced through the water, cloudy with blood and the debris of lost lives. The dragon stopped his thrashing, the blindness of his rage dissipating. Those in pain were given moments of peace. An eerie silence followed, colored only by a Merra's voice. Those who died during the song did so with less fear; those who lived were given the courage they would need to continue. All could not take their eyes from the sight of the golden-haired Merra, nearly transparent with the effort of living. She hung broken, tangled in the perversely festive garlands, near the terrible eye of the Seadragon. They watched as the huge beast began to swim slowly from the Center Place, and the respite that was woven into the spell of her voice enveloped them. Farther and farther away the dragon swam, and even when they could no longer make out the form of the Merra on him, they could still hear fragments of the song drifting back, until there was nothing but the ruins.

When the song was over, Elan became aware of the coolness of the water that brushed past her face. She quaked at the savagery of the sorrow that sliced her in two, the same pain that was killing the Seadragon. There was nothing she could do but to repeat in cross-speak to him,

<I am here—I am here for you—I am here—> But the dragon was rent; no *Between*, no eon of time, would mend him. The Seadragon stopped and hung his head, waiting for Elan, his true *Between*, to free herself. But Elan's arms were broken and she felt herself dying as she left her being open to the dragon. She knew his weariness and felt his desire to answer the voices down. She knew he would go to them, and that she must follow.

<Please, let me go with you?> Elan asked. She was

so close to his eye she felt she would be pulled into some ancient place. <I am here, Seadragon, please—> She saw the hopelessness cast a darkness over his eye as he closed them.

<It is too late,> his sorrowful voice mourned, <too late.> And using his tongue to pull away garlands, he lifted the tangled mass of her hair away from his horn. Elan drifted downward. The dragon let her settle to the back of his raised talons and lowered her gently to a patch of sea grass. Elan knew there was no calling him back.

<Farewell, my Between,> he said, moving away from her carefully so the currents he caused would not hurt her more.

<Farewell, beloved Seadragon,> Elan cross-spoke, and soon after, she felt the darkness close in around her.

19

A New High Elder



Menol was in darkness and felt the thunder of collapsing caverns around him. He knew disaster was upon them, but he had seen none of it.

Before Kili had begun her song, a guard had approached Menol and said his attention was needed urgently. This Mog was not one whose services Menol had secretly enlisted, but perhaps there had been some change in plans.

He followed the guard into a passageway—where an ambush awaited him. Menol had thought to wear a shirt of woven shell, so the blade that was meant to kill him glanced away. In moments, the guards who had lain in wait for him found themselves attacked by the Mogs and Merramogs who had sworn to protect Menol and the Merra. A battle ensued, and as they fought for their lives, each became aware of some greater battle that was waged above them in the Center Place.

Menol and his guards killed the last of Groff's ambushing Mogs, and when they tried to leave the cavern they had entered, they found the entrance crushed. Screaming and devastation could be heard beyond, and narrow beams of light came through gaps in the fallen stone. Menol and some of his guards began pulling away the rubble while others went in search of another way out.

The dragon's assault had begun at this end of the Caverns and much of it had been caved in.

Menol had no way of knowing how long they fought, and as they used spears to pry away boulders, he thought he heard Elan's voice, but he knew that was impossible, so he believed it some illusion or wish. When at last they had made themselves a passageway large enough to swim

through, the vision of the Center Place and death that greeted them was horrifying. All they could see and taste was blood. Everywhere they looked, from the Grand Chamber up to the surface, ghoulish pieces of bodies floated by, an arm, a severed tail, a grimacing face. There was a constant hum of moaning and crying for help. The able-bodied slowly appeared and began searching for the injured.

Menol's first thought was for Elan. He looked in the direction he knew she had been and saw the Caverns remained less damaged near that end. He had seen nothing of her ordeal.

Nearby, Menol recognized the rubble of what had been the Elders' platform, and he rushed there to look for some sign of Edam. Menol asked any who were not too dazed to answer what had happened. He got only fragments of stories, and a guard who had been upon the Elders' platform told him he had seen the Elders scattered in every direction by the first blow of the dragon's tail. He was not certain, but Edam might have gone into one of the smaller chambers behind the platform.

Menol noticed that many were still dazed with shock, staring into the distance. He thought he saw the vague outline of the Seadragon disappearing and his heart wrenched again as he hoped Elan was all right. He found a low cave where several guards dug at the rocks with their hands and blades. These had been Edam's special guard and Menol knew they must be trying to free him.

Menol joined them in their task, and soon several large rocks were removed and Edam was found beneath a pile of heavy black stones. The cave he had gone into for shelter had collapsed upon him. The High Elder was not yet dead, but his lungs had been crushed and his color was gone. Menol did not try to move him and took his hand.

"Bring her back, if you can." Edam's voice was barely audible and blood drifted from his mouth.

"Don't talk, Edam, we will make this right somehow." Menol mourned his good friend and mentor.

Edam seemed troubled. "You don't know? You didn't see her?" he asked, and Menol's frown was all that answered him. "You were right, my friend." Edam smiled, and squeezed Menol's hand weakly as he died. Menol wanted to know what he meant, and in a rising panic,

he began to suspect Edam had referred to Elan, and that he had heard her voice amid the din. He turned to one of the guards, and both of them had to dodge a clattering of stones that fell down on them.

"What did he mean, didn't I see her?" Menol asked.

"He meant the Merra; she stopped the dragon." The guard seemed dazed as well.

"Where is she now, the Merra?" Menol waited as the Mog stared out into the distant sea. "Answer me! Where is she?" He shook the guard.

"She swam right up to his tearing teeth and looked into his eye to sing to him," the guard began, but could not continue. Menol's heart pounded as he feared the worst. This grieving in a Mog's voice was odd. Another guard took up his story.

"Somehow the maid got hung up on one of the beast's horns, tangled too bad to be free, that was if she even cared to be—she got whipped around like a piece of reed, but she was singing the whole time. Was like she was dead, she was so limp toward the end, but she kept singing—somehow." The guard looked amazed and forlorn as he recalled the sight. Menol wasted no more time, tearing through the water in the direction he had seen the Seadragon. He swam fiercely, his eyes searching the seafloor and the distance ahead for the Seadragon. The giant was no longer visible, but Menol remembered where he had been heading. He ignored the splitting pain in his lungs as he raced onward. Around him others searched, and he knew it must be for the flash of gold that would be Elan, but Menol passed them, asking the Balance to let her live—to let him find her.

The last of the searchers far behind him, Menol slowed. He sensed her before he saw her, and at last spotted Elan lying in the sea grass where the dragon had left her.

He swam down to her, the denial choking him. She looked dead, and the purple bruises along her arms and ribs were beginning to swell. Wounds gaped beneath her breasts where the roped garlands had torn her. Menol cried to see her so broken, and remembered too well his promise to protect her. He hovered over her, his cheek above her lips, hoping for the faintest trace of life. He did not breathe himself until at last he felt it. A whisper. Menol cried out and gently moved her to trace his fingers down her spine to see if her backbone had been crushed.

He felt no breaks there and took her into his arms to carry her back. He felt rent by his anguish. Elan was lifeless, and he feared with every moment that she would die in his arms. He raged against her leaving him.

The first ones Menol saw coming toward him were two Merramaids riding a Nemu. He recognized one of them. Tia, and the Merra healer Issa, were ashen and grave as they bent over Elan. The Nemu watched silently, wounded himself.

"She barely lives," Issa said, and as she did, she slipped a leaf she carried between Elan's lips. Tia loosened the sleepnet she carried, and both Merras and Menol gently wrapped Elan inside it. Menol looked reluctant to let her go.

"There is little time for her," Issa warned.

"You must let us take her, Menol," Tia whispered urgently.

"I cannot be with her?" he asked, knowing it would be impossible.

"There is a healing place we will bring her, and you cannot follow," Tia said. She felt compassion, knowing Menol was torn by his love for Elan. "There is little you can do to help her now but call upon the Balance to keep her with us."

Menol watched as they secured both ends of the sleepnet in the dolphin's mouth.

"How will I know if she—if she lives," he asked.

"This Nemu will bring you word," Tia answered as they swam away in the direction of the Merra ruins. He knew they were right. There was nothing he could do.

Turning his attention to the Caverns, he swam back toward the destruction. Already there were sharks prowling, following the blood on the currents. Menol told the other searchers he met that the Merra had been found, and they turned back with him to see what could be done to help the injured in the Center Place. They would have much to prepare for; the sea would be thick with sharks soon, and more threatening still, the storms that would surely come.

They knew from their history that disturbances in the Balance brought catastrophe. On a small scale, it was like one anemone dying in a tide pool, spreading the poison until all living things either sickened or died.

The dragon's wrath would be felt upon the currents

that passed from arctic seas to balmy lagoons. Like the hurricanes in the dry world, currents would rip through valleys and across sandy plains and tear solid rock from mountain face. These would come from nowhere, and return without warning, one disturbance triggering the next from sea to sea. And no one knew how long they would last. If the Seadragon was truly gone, they could only hope the storms would not go on indefinitely.

Menol swam over the eastern rim of the Caverns where Mog guards tried to free survivors from the wreckage of the caves. Mog healers, looking overwhelmed, moved up and down the rows of drifting wounded, trying to find some aid to give them.

Before he did anything else, Menol swam toward the end of the Caverns where his family lived. A Merramog was trying to move a large rock, so he swam down to help her. Beneath it lay her child, dead, and the maid took the child in her arms and swam away without a sound.

As Menol neared the section of the Caverns that housed his family's dwelling, he was relieved to see it had been spared major damage, as had many of the dwellings on this level. The moment he entered the cave he saw that they prepared what they could to help outside—shovels and webbing. His mother and sisters gave startled shouts and rushed to him. "We were so frightened," his mother cried. "We saw them take you away, then everything around you was destroyed. Your sisters wouldn't let me believe you had been killed."

Menol stroked his mother's hair and tried to smile at his sisters. "Everyone is all right?" he asked.

"Yes, your father has already left to help the others." She looked gravely at Menol, knowing he would leave immediately.

"We saw her," one of his sisters said. Menol looked warmly at Reena, the eldest. She was beautiful, with much the same coloring as Elan. She had sung with the Merra at the hole and had deep respect for Elan. Her face told Menol she knew, and shared his grief silently. "Does she live?"

"Barely," Menol whispered. Reena touched his cheek, and watched him with her mother and sisters as he left for the Grand Chamber to do what he must against the chaos.

* * *

The Squid swam at a steady pace, startling the few creatures who happened across his path. He had been informed by Menol's source that the nest of the shedragon was a two- or three-day swim from the Caverns. He would make all haste in his journey knowing the Merra hunters would follow as quickly as they were able. He would have little trouble dispatching the remaining guards around the shedragon, and as his powerful muscles glided through the many leagues, he set his mind to the task of creating a plan to do just that.

It wasn't until the following day that the Squid began to feel a sense of urgency and danger. He knew the time when the new Between would meet the dragon grew near, and he wondered if this danger he sensed had to do with the ceremony. The distance was too vast for Elan or Tia to speak clearly with him, so the Squid tried to bury these worries and to concentrate on his own part in the plan. There was nothing he could do now for the rest. It had begun, and all of them must do what they could to save the Seadragons and the Balance.

Despite his determination to quiet these doubts, the Squid became more certain that there was real peril. He could still not divine the source. It seemed to be coming from all sides at once. He increased his speed, the tips of his legs vibrating behind him as the rushing water frothed in his wake.

For short moments he closed his all-seeing eyes to allow his mind to determine the threat. But there was nothing but the growing menace of it.

As the Seadragon, leagues away, began his destruction, the Squid, for the first time he could remember, knew fear. A tremor so powerful ran through him that the ancient creature was stricken, and drifted as if dead. Though no clear vision of the horror was known to him, he could not escape the rift suddenly torn in the Balance. From where he had come, it began, and the echo of violence played out at his destination. Though the Squid felt a laceration of his heart and being, he forced himself onward. The disturbance in the Balance was a soundless screech of loss. The Squid battled against it, and flew through the water toward the shedragon. His eye pierced the distance before his mind. He saw specks, black and darting. Vicious tearing and frenzied movement. The

leagues dissolved as the Squid raced forward; his mind made sense of the nameless horror as he came close enough to see that the specks were not specks but a pod of killer whales. As the Seadragon, in his rage, whipped the sea, his frenzy tipped the Balance, pregnant with evil. Violence, let loose, had infected this pod of killers, and half the sea away the whales played out in mortal harmony the dragon's mindless savagery. They had no more power to go against it than fragments of seaweed carried on the storm. With quick and brutal cruelty they attacked the shedragon. They tried to tear her from her nest, and butted and ripped at her with their jagged teeth. She struggled little, and sensing too the distant rage of her mate of endless centuries, she felt only confusion. In moments a killer had ripped a gash at her throat, and her dragon's blood and life spilled out upon the ravaged sea.

By the time the Squid arrived her head had fallen, her eyes dimming. The Squid chased the few killers that remained. Some of the whales pursued the fragment of guard decimated by the attack.

Many Mogs had been severed in two, their pitiful spears still clenched in hand. The Squid felt the diminishing of the Balance, as palpable as a coming dusk.

Swimming back to the shedragon, he thought no sight could wrench him more than her fallen majesty. But there was one vision more tragic. As the Squid neared the nest, he saw that in her battle, the massive shedragon had shifted her weight, and now one large talon rested lifelessly across her treasure. Through the water cloudy with blood, there floated the unmistakable fragments of shell. The Squid closed his eyes, unwilling to witness any more of this sorrow.

<I have lived far too long,> he said to himself. His skin tingled in warning, and he opened his eyes again. In the distance, three specks approached him. The killer whales were returning.

Menol entered what remained of the Center Place. He must pull together what he could. Anyone in an official position was inundated by requests for help, was asked to solve problems that had no solutions. When Menol entered, many of them rushed to him.

"Menol, the sharks are attacking already," one said.

"Have your Mogs find as many netters as they can—

and send for those out in the fishing grounds—they will be needed here, and should be warned of the danger ahead,” Menol said. The administrator turned to his task, and Menol had to ask the others to wait until he was back from the chambers.

He had no idea how many of the Elders still lived. Menol had been told that the platform had been crushed first. Kili too, trying to escape, had rushed directly beneath the dragon’s talon, but no one even heard her scream above the shrieks of the crowd. Had Groff felt the wrath of the dragon as well?

Menol found a way into the Grand Chamber. Much of the roof was destroyed; he looked up at the sea and sky above them. Already it grew dark with a coming storm as he swam back to another chamber off the main cavern.

At first he was not noticed. He counted six remaining Elders. Several of them were bent over someone at the far end of the chamber. Menol wondered if they had been informed of Edam’s death.

There was a flurry of excitement as the first of the remaining Elders saw that Menol had arrived.

“We thought you had been killed too,” Balkar said. Menol was certain he saw relief in the normally reserved Mog.

“You’ve heard about Edam, then?” Menol asked. Most of the Elders nodded their heads. They grieved for him, feeling cast adrift without his leadership. It was at this point that Menol saw the weakened Elder was Groff. Groff had lived and Edam had died. Menol could find no comfort in believing that all would be right within the Balance. A just Mog, his friend, was gone, a maid he loved was near death, and this creature lived.

“Praise the Balance, you were spared,” Kado said. Menol was surprised at this sudden warmth, and he wondered at its meaning. Perhaps this was as close as they could come to remorse. For the truth was difficult to escape. The disaster had come about because these Elders had chosen a Between who was false and served their purposes, one they thought saved them the risk of other threat. Their cowardice had caused terrible suffering and much more was to come. Menol realized this was his most opportune moment for getting concessions from them. The reef belongs to he who takes it, Edam had said, and Menol began calculating the vote in his mind.

Who remained who would back Groff, and who would favor Menol? Menol knew the next few moments could decide all. Most of those who remained had been Groff's followers. Menol saw Groff was lying still, being tended to by several of the Elders and a healer.

"What's wrong with him?" Menol didn't want to use Groff's name.

Hron glanced down, and did little to disguise his disgust. "We thought at first he had been injured in the melee. That is what Groff claimed himself, but Balkar saw someone in the crowd try to kill him. The guards pulled the Mog off him just moments before he would have been wearing a knife in his heart. They contained the Mog and brought Groff here."

"And those who saw him carried past hissed," Balkar said. "You can imagine how much anger at him there must be—it is suicide to attack an Elder."

"They blame him for the catastrophe—he forced a false Between upon the Seadragon," another said.

"Amazing how clear one's vision becomes from the rubble," Balkar said facetiously. He had voted with Menol for Elan, but there was still the taste of blood on the water, and accusations were useless.

Menol knew he must act now, before they conveniently forgot their anger at Groff. The future of the Caverns, and those who still lived, was in jeopardy.

"Some of you help him up," he called out. Groff was relying on the only strength he had among the other Elders at this moment, sympathy. "There are many decisions to be made, and delays will cost lives," Menol stated as Groff struggled up with the help of the others. Somewhere in the deeper Caverns there was another avalanche of falling stone. The rumble brought all attention to Menol. He could feel Groff's hatred as the old Mog swam clumsily to join the others.

"Edam is dead," Menol reminded them. The pall of sorrow was heavy, though Menol could see from Groff's expression that this was news he had been too distracted to hear before this moment. Evidently, the others had not told him. Menol was not surprised to see the gleam of hope as Groff surveyed those who were left among them to vote.

"We must choose a new High Elder, and we must also appoint new Elders to the vacant positions. The sooner

that is done, the sooner we can get to the task of protecting the Caverns and its inhabitants from what will come."

"Then let us get on with the vote," Groff said, his voice low with threat. "We know how to make decisions—most of us have made them for many winters—and need no pretty speeches." Menol ignored him, focusing instead upon the four Elders whose votes might still be swayed by fear of Groff.

"Each of you may have his own theories about what has led us to this tragedy. Whatever the reason, I am certain that if you have the courage to look within, you will admit that we have made fatal mistakes, not just at this Choosing, but for many winters. It is time for change, and time to drop our notions of—"

"Will you get to the point," Groff barked, but several of the Elders looked at him angrily. Menol again ignored Groff and kept his voice calm.

"I submit that our survival will require radical departure from what we have held up until this day to be true." Menol looked at each of their faces; they listened, uncomfortably, but he had their full attention. "I want to warn you that if I am chosen High Elder, I am going to propose that the empty positions among us be filled by Merra." Menol waited for the commotion.

"Are you mad!" Groff screamed.

"Let him finish!" Balkar cut him off.

"Before you disagree in haste, and out of force of long habit, I only want to remind you what you saw out in the Center Place today. You saw a Merra, alone, face a terror beyond any of your nightmares. She stopped the Seadragon from leaving these Caverns nothing more than a flattened pile of stones. She is Merra—the same Merra we have done our best to decimate. I believe she is one of many courageous and intelligent Merra, and I know that we need their help. They may help us to achieve the Balance I believe was lost when the Ghrismogs alone took it upon themselves to decide our destinies."

"This is insanity!" Groff's eyes bulged and his cheeks grew scarlet. "At a time like this, when we need direction and leadership, you propose to appoint beings who talk freely with fish to work among us? You have truly been bewitched!" His desperation showed, and infected the others.

"I myself am ashamed for choosing Kili. I knew in my

heart who should have been Between, and after what I saw today, I will never forget it, I am ashamed—" Kado said. Groff was so furious he looked as if he would strike him, but Kado did not flinch. Kado was the weakest among them, and Groff in all his wrath could not make him back down. This did more to make the decision than anything else Menol could say.

"Does anyone know if the Seadragon let her go?" Balkar asked. "Has anyone found her?"

"I have seen her." Menol kept his voice steady. "There was little life left in her." He kept his grief to himself, again surprised at how Elan's courage had managed to touch even these Mogs, for they were stricken by this report.

"Who tends to her?" The healer who had been seeing to Groff was still in the room. He looked eager for the reputation tending the Between would bring him.

"Merra," Menol said. The healer left at the silent rebuke, and Menol turned his attention back to the decisions at hand.

"The Seadragon is gone," Balkar pronounced, "and whether the Between lives or not, our ordeal has just begun. The Seadragon will be left untended unless we can find him somehow."

"The first storm comes already," Kado intoned with dread as the dimming light fell into the cavern mouth.

"Shouldn't extra guards be sent to protect the shedragon and her eggs?" Hron asked. "The storms will certainly be a danger to her, and what if she tries to follow the Seadragon? All our future rests with the eggs."

"On my honor"—Groff laughed, changing his face to that of friendly uncle—"you sound like babbling superstitious maids. There will be storms, we have lived through others. We will rebuild the Caverns, and life will continue as it has—I saw none of you complaining then."

"Groff, surely even you can feel the threat on the Balance?" Balkar waved his hand through the water to indicate everything around them. "The Seadragon's fury triggered—"

"All of you are talking nonsense. This incident has made you pathetic, you have lost all reason. It amazes me that I, even after the vicious attack I received, am the only one here able to think clearly." Groff smiled calmly as everyone turned their attention to him. "Think a mo-

ment, and tell me it isn't possible that you all have turned this around in your minds? Can you be absolutely certain that it wasn't the Merrra who triggered the Seadragon's rage?" His anger rose again when he saw that they were listening. "Everyone knows the Merrras can control those beasts, and I can prove she was planning something, and she was planning it with *him*!" Groff pointed an accusing finger at Menol. "Remember he conveniently disappeared from the platform before there was any danger!"

"Yes, and what I found was not safety but an ambush of your guards," Menol said, the marks of his clash clearly evident on his shirt of shell. "And had I been upon the platform I might have saved Edam somehow." Groff's accusations had done him harm, for the Elders began arguing with him. Groff was outraged not to be winning his way against them. Menol exchanged a glance with Balkar and knew this was the time for the vote.

"There has been enough discussion. We must decide, and be on with it." He looked around and saw that they were ready. The glint of fear in Groff's eye foretold the outcome. Balkar called the vote and one by one the Elders named their choice.

"Menol," Hron said, and looked at Kado next to him.

"Menol," Kado said and looked to Tuan.

"Menol," Tuan, normally Groff's Mog, called his vote meekly. And on around the chamber the vote went until the last vote came to Groff. He had already lost, so all he could do was fill this room with his hatred.

"You will be sorry for this," he warned. "You will wish you had not been so traitorous." His threat hung upon the current as he left the chamber. The moment he disappeared, much of the tension left with him, and the remainder of the Elders turned their attention to what must be done to lessen further suffering in the Caverns.

"Hron, will you take charge of finding shelter for those whose living caves were destroyed?" Hron nodded and left the chamber. Darkness was upon them, and he would need all haste.

"Kado, will you supervise the gathering of as much sea vegetable and foodstuffs as possible to be stored within the deeper chambers? The storms will tear it from its roots and we will need as much of it as you can have gathered. Tell them they will be paid for their harvesting labor." Kado nodded and left.

“Balkar, you must take care in your task, and I will aid you in it. Many of the guards have been bought by Groff. We don’t know how many, but we may want to reappoint head guards. They will have to be organized into groups. We will need some to stave off shark attack, and others must begin clearing the rubble and shoring up caves that threaten to collapse.”

“I will start right away,” Balkar said.

“I will join you soon. First, I want to meet with the Merras and ask that they appoint four Elders from among them. They have healers I have heard, and this will be a service they can provide us if they are willing,” Menol said, and turned to the remaining Elders. To each of them he assigned a task.

Menol sighed deeply when they left. He had moved through this drama with half a heart. His mind was filled with one concern over all the others: would Elan live? With the dragon gone and storms encroaching, Menol knew their future rested with a maid who had embraced death, had taken a storm of wrath into her own heart and enveloped it. The Merras had said he would be sent word if she lived. Out of necessity, he would hold back his wall of sorrow until he knew.

20

One Small Thing



Tia could hear the waves of the first storm crashing against the domed rock of the upper garden. The under-sea currents raced outside their sanctuary, and the fissures that allowed fresh seawater into the garden spouted fiercely. The Nemu was safe inside the entrance tunnel, where Tia had tended to his shark wounds. He waited for any call to help.

Tia remembered storms in the Caverns. Even in their living shelters, storms made life miserable. The current shot through passageways; the sand and silt that was whipped up from the bottom made the water gritty and difficult to breathe. They had scarcely made it to the garden with Elan before the sky turned black. Tia wondered how many more would die in this storm.

Tia hovered near Elan's sleepnet, which was fastened beneath the overhang. The moment they arrived, Issa had rushed about looking at this miracle that was the garden and discovering how much she had to work with here. It was going to take all of her ability to bring Elan back. Her fever had grown worse, and suddenly Tia felt helpless. Even with Issa, the wisest among the Merra in the art of healing, even with all the magic of this place, Tia was afraid they would not save Elan. She shuddered and wondered what malaise was afloat to reach even into this sanctuary? Tia placed another leaf between Elan's lips. It was daborah, and the juice of this plant worked to heal the body and the will.

The first moment Issa looked at Elan, she had used tongue telling and shook her head. "There is sickness here beyond what we see. That which we cannot see will be the most difficult to cure."

Issa's presence was a blessing in the Balance. She had traveled from a distant hold. She had come to work in the garden, and had arrived at the Center Place just moments after the Seadragon's frenzy had subsided. Before her arrival, Tia had chosen for her a young helper named Minnow, a maid of fourteen winters. Tia heard Minnow swim toward her from gathering.

"I've another basket of c'tor," Minnow said, hanging it on a nearby lump of coral.

"Here, let me help you peel it." Tia reached out for one of the stiff large leaves, and Minnow handed one to her.

"Issa is excited by everything here," Minnow said quietly. "She said if we did not have all of this, we would have no chance to help Elan, instead of little." Tia could feel the young maid's unspoken reverence for Elan. Both of them worked at peeling one side of the skin away from the healing plant, exposing a gelatinous clear substance. This was pressed against the length of Elan's body, covering each wound and abrasion. Issa had had little time to marvel at the garden, but had cried out in joy to see that the Merra had planted an entire room of the healing plant. She had never seen c'tor herself, but said it was the most powerful of tools against death, for it drew out poisons of the flesh and spirit. She had learned of it from knowledge passed down in her family for hundreds of winters. Issa returned with a basket of ingredients and a bundle of sea grass. She checked Elan, her attitude grim but purposeful.

"Tia, Minnow and I go to the surface to make a potion. It will be the first time I have used the ingredients actually intended. It should break her fever. I need you to do something, if you will," Issa asked.

"Anything."

"I have brought sea grasses. Can you weave them into broad plaits? After we have given Elan our concoction, I will need to set the bones in her arms and shoulders." Issa looked upon Elan, who was becoming less recognizable with her bruises and swelling. "Poor child, so broken. There is something else," Issa frowned and looked up at Tia. "Do you feel it? It seems all around us?" Tia nodded, acknowledging the disturbance in the Balance.

"It must be something very terrible," Minnow said.

"We will know soon enough," Issa said, and handed the bundle of sea grass to Tia.

Menol heard the thrashing of the storm outside the Grand Chamber. Much of the business of running the Caverns had had to move to deeper areas of the caves. The clearing of rubble was slow and little remained of the Grand Chamber but the massive mosaic of the Seadragons. Now it was a constant reminder.

The water was cloudy with silt. When the storms cleared, the deep hunters gathered as many glowfish as they could find since so much of their time was spent now in the deeper Caverns. There was little sun to be seen.

Menol looked at the new faces around the chamber and felt strength in them. It was their first formal meeting since the disaster. He did not know how the Merra had done it so quickly; perhaps those sent already were leaders among them. The Merra had appointed two Merra males and two maids to fill the vacancies left by Mog Elders. Menol thought for a moment there might be protest among the Elders about suddenly sharing their power with maids, but after Elan's heroism, there was no questioning.

It had been six days since the disaster. Menol had had no word about Elan. It took all his concentration to deal with the matters at hand, and to make decisions despite the death pall that still lingered inexplicably. Food was growing scarce, and another problem was in the making. Groff had disappeared with half the guard, more than four hundred Mogs.

Menol saw in the Merras' faces that they were reserving judgment of him. They had come from distant waters, and Menol was glad they had been able to make it before this storm, which was the most violent of the two that had passed. Menol felt the chill of the arctic seas that had come with a change in the currents. He hoped that wherever Elan was, she was safe.

The Elders were talking quietly among themselves, nervously awaiting the appearance of Groff. Some were still hoping there was another explanation for his disappearance. Menol knew it was useless to wait any longer and started the meeting.

"Welcome Merra," Menol began, looking at each of them, "and thank you for helping us at this difficult

time." The Merra nodded their heads. Menol liked the steadiness in their eyes.

"I am Arika," one of the maids said, "and this is Muni." She indicated the other. Both were dark-haired with pale blue eyes.

"And I am Ollon," the male said.

"And I am Will," said the last. Each of the Elders introduced himself, and Hron asked Arika how many healers were among the Merra. She was about to answer when her eyes suddenly widened. Menol followed her gaze to where two Mogs swam into the entrance. Everyone watched as a battered and injured guard was led into the chamber by a netter.

"Begging pardon, High Elder, but I found this one wandering about just beyond the second reef. He was about to be ate by a couple sharks and asked to see the Elders," the netter said as he let the guard go. The Mog was able to swim on his own, hovering before the long table of Elders as if he were on trial. He had a wild look in his eyes and seemed at the same moment to be on the verge of collapse. The Merra exchanged a look of dread, then Arika caught Menol's eye. In the glance she asked permission to speak with the guard. Menol nodded to her.

"You have come very far through storms and danger?" Though it was posed as a question, Menol noticed the calming tone of it, as if a mother were telling a frightened child that some danger had passed.

"I have, Sabat, and I have carried with me a burden of terrible weight." He showed no surprise to be talking with a Merramaid as Elder and seemed eager to rush to her for comfort and forgiveness. Menol felt it too and wondered what she knew.

"You are special guard?" Arika asked him.

"Yes, I am—to the shedragon. I have been for fifteen winters, Elder. And of the twenty of us who guarded her and her new eggs, I am the only one left to tell this story." The guard was weakened by some memory, but responded to the waiting he sensed in Arika and the other Elders.

"Please tell us so we may share your sorrow, guard," Muni said.

"I don't know when it was—I have lost all count of time in this journey. But before these storms started, the

other guards and I were waiting. In the past two moons there have been more strange things happening than I have ever seen. First we saw the—" The guard hesitated about something, then continued with more conviction. "Since the Merra spirit sang to the dragons, and they had the eggs, the dragons were different. They talked to each other more—in the cross-speaking we never heard—and we thought that all there would be to do was to get ready for the new Between and for the eggs hatching. A joyous time that would have been too." The Mog guard stopped and looked down at the sandy floor. He was using all his courage to keep the memory from overtaking him. When he looked up, his eyes rested on Arika, his face contorted. "It's going to sound strange to you, but being around the shedragon as much as we all were, all of the guards got to love her in a way. We love the Seadrragon too, but not the same. And when she laid the eggs, it was almost like we were the—och, it sounds the fool to say it—but we felt what she felt—like a mother. We felt like we had some part of it—and I know it was because we were around her so much, and she gives off that feeling to us, but—it was a terrible thing—terrible!" The Mog broke down and Will had to restrain Muni from going to him. The guard had to complete his task, for his own well-being. Everyone waited, and on the faces of the Elders was fear of the news that would come.

"The sky grew black, and the shedragon was restless, or perhaps she knew what was coming. From nowhere a pod of killers, the largest pod I've seen—came in a tearing frenzy. It was more like they'd lost their minds. There was a screaming sound." The Mog guard paused, and tried to make his voice sound less desperate, and more as if this were a report that was his duty to relay. "They attacked and attacked, and butted into her and tore her flesh from her. And she might have had a chance, but she wouldn't leave the nest—she wouldn't leave the eggs unprotected.

"Most of us used our spears and ran them into as many of the beasts as we could, but it was a massacre. The killers attacked the guards too. Bit them in two, most of them. I don't know why I'm alive of all of us—but she's dead. I circled back later, when I could. What was left of her finally floated up and away from the nest. Her blood made the water thick red. The weight of her, and the

blows she had taken, left the nest in ruin. I saw the shell pieces floating. There was a Squid—a giant Squid. The pod attacked it, then two of the killers followed me halfway back here. I felt like taking a rock and bashing in my own head. I don't care about anything anymore—I feel the same now, now that I've done my part, and told you. I don't know why, but I know the worst has happened, and nothing good is left for us.”

Everyone was silent a moment, trying to grasp what this meant. Menol was lost in thought, knowing somehow that the death of the shedragon would hurt Elan most of all. He was suddenly more frightened than he had been for her. When he looked up he found that Arika was watching him.

“Do you think the Between knows?” Menol asked her.

“I am afraid she must,” Arika answered.

“We knew there was some tragedy on the current beyond the SeadrAGON's frenzy, but until now we could only wait to know its name,” Will said. The Mog guard looked to Menol as they spoke, confused.

“On the day the SeadrAGON was to meet his Between, he met instead an imposter we chose for him, and not the Merra you saw sing to him,” Menol explained.

“She was real?” the guard asked.

“Yes, she is real,” Menol answered.

“When the SeadrAGON knew we had betrayed him, he vented his rage. Most of the Caverns were destroyed. It was this poison that infected the pod that killed your shedragon. There was nothing you could do to stop them.”

“And the SeadrAGON?” the guard asked.

“He is gone as well,” Menol answered grimly.

Now it was the guard who looked at the Elders with sympathy. He knew the task before them would be impossible, to protect those left alive from the storms and a sea turned savage.

“The Balance is gone then,” the Mog said almost to himself.

The storm outside was just calming. Pieces of sunlight began to appear between clouds and made the garden grow light and dark. Elan's fever had come and gone for several days, and this was the first day they had felt a real drop in the dangerous burning. Tia, Issa, and Minnow

hovered around Elan's sleepnet. They had watched her tirelessly and had had no time to themselves. Tia rebraided Issa's hair. Issa was older than Tia, and her hair had once been the color of rust. Now it was as pale as sand, and the braid fell down her straight back. Minnow, when she wasn't hurrying for Issa to one part of the garden or the other, watched every flutter of Elan's lashes.

The wounds over Elan's broken bones were beginning to close. These had taken longer than her other gashes because the plaits of sea grass had to be removed and replaced often so the healing skin would not attach itself to the bandage. Issa was most grateful that the c'tor had kept infection from starting. Now most of the swelling had gone down, and Issa could trace the fusing of the bones of Elan's arms, ribs, and shoulders beneath her expert fingers.

This lowering of her fever was the best sign they had had. Three days before, as the peak of the storm raged loudly about them, Minnow had awakened Tia and Issa because Elan had started to talk in her fever. It had taken the entire night, and all three of the Merra were pale with what they had learned by morning. In the mumbling were fragments of her opening to the Seadragon, and bare pieces of what Elan understood of the shedragon's tragedy. Though there was no news they could have learned that would have been worse, they knew at last what held Elan near death.

But today the sun would come out, and Elan was in less danger. Issa looked at the small turtle who had remained nearly every moment in the sea grass near Elan's sleepnet. He would not even leave to eat, so Minnow had finally gotten him to take pieces of fruit from her.

"I think even Tooki senses she will live. See how his eyes are brighter?" Minnow asked Issa.

"At least he is eating now. I thought we would have a turtle to tend to as well," Issa said. Tia smiled.

Since they had learned of the shedragon's death and the destruction of the eggs, they had had little to smile about. Issa watched Minnow turn her adoring look back to Elan. Minnow had been devoted to the Merra Between from the moment she first saw her.

Minnow had learned that the Merra would sing at the hole and she wanted desperately to go. Her parents had

refused, afraid for her safety among that many Mogs. Finally, Tia convinced them of Minnow's special gift with plants, and they had given Minnow into Tia's care to work in the garden. It was Tia who had given in to her pleading to go with the Merra to sing.

Minnow had never been as terrified as she had that day at the chasm. She wanted to swim away, until she had seen Elan's face. The way she had looked made the younger Merra forget all her own fear. She remembered thinking there could be no one as brave or as beautiful, but when she came out of the abyss, her eyes had changed. That's what Minnow thought. They looked just like the Seadragon's eyes had looked in the Grand Chamber. Minnow would never forget the abyss. Issa and Tia had told her that she had helped to call back the Between with her voice, and now she was calling her back again. The Merras responded to Elan's soft moaning.

"Minnow, will you find Elan something sweet to eat?" Issa whispered. "If she wakes, we will want her to eat if she can—it has been too long."

"Fruit? Any kind?" Minnow asked.

"Yes, and some of the dowa plant," Issa answered. With one more look at Elan, Minnow hurried away. She wanted to be back before Elan awoke. She wanted to hold her hand and tell her to get well.

Issa pulled stray hairs away from Elan's face and felt her pulse. Tooki left his clump of grass and paddled nearby, watching Issa's every move.

"She can live now if she decides to. Too much rests with a dying dragon."

"We should get word to Menol, now that the storm is quieting. Nemu can go to the Caverns," Tia whispered.

Minnow raced back, her basket full, careful to come to a stop some distance from the sleepnet so she would not disturb the water around Elan.

Tia smiled again, sensing Minnow's eagerness. "Don't worry, she hasn't spoken yet," she said.

Minnow handed her basket to Issa, took Elan's hand through the sleepnet, and leaned very close over her. She looked up excitedly as she saw Elan open her eyes and look directly into her face.

Elan felt the child's sweet breath against her cheek. How pretty, she thought, how pretty she is. Suddenly the pain of her body and the pain of her memory of the

terrible day swept over her, and she closed her eyes tightly, holding back a cry. Minnow squeezed her hand; it frightened the young Merra how weakly Elan returned the squeeze. When the wave of pain passed, Elan opened her eyes again and saw Tia and Issa.

"He's gone"—her whisper was cracked—"and the shedragon is dead." Her voice was so weak and slow they could barely hear her.

"These things we will think about later, Elan. You must allow yourself to get well," Issa said.

Elan looked at her, still weak and confused. "Are you Issa?" she asked. The old Merra nodded. "You've been trying to make me well?" It was painful for her to talk, and painful to listen to the broken voice.

"Yes, but you must help me," Issa said.

Elan's eyes widened as another wave of pain, perhaps fear, passed over her.

"Menol? Does he live? And Nemu? And the Squid? Where are they?" Her shattered voice rose, and Issa tried to calm her.

"Menol is not hurt. He was the first to find you and waits every moment to know if you will live," Tia answered.

Issa hesitated, afraid to deliver bad news. "Nemu is well, but we have heard nothing from the Squid since he left to find the shedragon." Issa and Tia secretly feared he may have been killed by the same whales that killed the shedragon. "There have been many storms and it is possible he is holed up in some distant grotto waiting for them to pass," Issa said, wanting to believe it.

"No one has seen him?" A new fear crept over Elan.

Issa placed another hand on her shoulder. "You are very sick, Elan, and until you are stronger, you can do nothing to help any of them." Her tone was firm, and Elan seemed to sink. She looked up at the young Merra who still hovered over her.

Minnow looked at her lovingly. "I am Minnow—I saw you at the chasm—I was there, singing."

Elan smiled weakly. "You must be very brave, Minnow." Minnow's face shone as she looked at Tia and Issa proudly. There was a moment of quiet that was interrupted by a cross-spoken message from outside the garden. It was Tia's Nemu.

"Minnow, why don't you take Tia through the passage

to see Nemu. His wounds may need tending," Issa suggested. Minnow nodded, carefully letting go of Elan's hand to take Tia's.

Elan closed her eyes wearily, and Issa watched until the others were gone. Issa cut small pieces of fruit and laid her hand on Elan's shoulder. Elan felt the goodness and strength in the touch and opened her eyes to find Issa staring at her. She took the fruit Issa placed in her mouth and chewed it dutifully, though the sorrow in her left no desire for food.

"Now you must listen carefully, for I have something important to tell you." Elan heard the calm warning and concern for her. "We cannot make you well against your will." Elan felt frightened at what she heard; she had no suspicion that in her was anything but the wish to be well.

"You have opened yourself to the Seadragon without barriers. He did not protect you because of his rage, nor were you able to protect yourself from knowing the many centuries of grief he has seen. No Between has tried this, for no tragedy has been this bitter." Issa saw that Elan paid close attention. "I said nothing to the others, but even with your many injuries, you were closer to death than you should have been. You still may be. Without recognizing it in your thinking mind, something in you will give up, and you will go the easy way. You will die slowly, quietly somewhere, or in some manner violent, it matters not. But it will be because you can find nothing worth living for—and the most difficult way for you will be to live. It will be much the same as it was for you in the hole. In death there is promised peace and in life only difficulty. Only now it is more of an ordeal for you because what pulls you to this peace is the Seadragon himself, who answers that call in his weariness.

"You must find something to care about. If Menol cannot make you want to live, or if the shedragon who is dead, or the Seadragon who is gone were all you thought you would live for, then you must find something small. Something, I don't know what. It is nothing I can give to you, or anyone else can give to you. You must find it yourself or you will die. You must find the voice of Ondine who sings to the coming storm." Issa recalled the myth of the Merra who had gone to the dry world only to return as a spirit. Her life there had been sorrowful, and

she was so at peace to be again in the sea that she could even find some light in the approach of storms. Her voice, the myth said, was heard singing courageously as the black clouds approached, warning others of the danger.

Issa could see in Elan's eyes that she had understood, but no life burned there. Elan contemplated without fear the option of dying as Ondine had done.

"Sleep if you can," Issa whispered, and Elan felt the brushing kiss across her forehead, someplace far away. She was consumed by a terrible loneliness, for nowhere in her fevered dreams, nor in any half-dream state ever again, would she hear the voices of the Seadragons. She felt his loneliness and could not hear him, somewhere in the endless sea. He would not call to her again, nor to his mate or eggs. He would find someplace to die and Elan would follow him. The thought gave her peace.

21

The Voice of Ondine



At the end of this day the Elders would meet with netters who had been notified to return to the Caverns. For a few moments, Menol wanted to think only of Elan. He wanted to remember what little but wondrous time they had spent together. He swam quickly to the bright rooms of the Merra ruins to spend a moment alone and to thank the Balance that his love was alive.

He swam near the room of the Merra dance, but could not make himself enter that place. Though he knew Elan lived, he feared death could still take her, for the heart of the danger was the loss of the shedragon and the destruction of the eggs. The Merra Elders had talked with him on many occasions about the link between Elan and her charges. They even intimated that her only chance of surviving was bound inevitably with the survival of the Seadragon, so they were formulating a plan to search for the giant. Merra were gathering here in the ruins. The plan to hunt for him relied much on Elan, and few had the courage to imagine how impossible the task would be, should Elan be unable to hunt with them.

Menol made himself leave the Merra ruins and start back for the Caverns. With much on his mind, the distance passed quickly and the momentary quiet he had felt slipped away. Everywhere he looked around the Center Place, guards and the common Mog were laboring hastily to repair what they could and to prepare for the next inescapable storm. It seemed to Menol there had been some lessening in them. That was the second brightening of their dim future.

There had still been no sighting of Groff, and a few more of the guards who were working in the Caverns

disappeared every day. Groff was hidden someplace, using the wealth he had accumulated over many winters to buy himself fighters and loyalty. For all Menol knew, they would attack the Caverns at any moment. There were few who lived within the safety of the walls who had experienced violence or threat, only netters or hunters. Menol knew that some of the Mog guards had to be in readiness at all times to protect the Caverns, but they were all needed to continue clearing and trying to bring back some order to the chaos.

Hunger was always a threat. The storms didn't allow the hunters or netters much success, and the violent currents left little remaining of the groves of sea vegetables.

Menol swam through the still-ravaged Center Place into the Grand Chamber. The Elders were already waiting, as were the two netters Menol recognized from before the Choosing. He smiled in greeting to them.

"You are back again, and no one is happier than I am that you are alive and well enough to tell us we would have been wiser to have heeded your warnings." The netter nodded at Menol, and smiled in return. Most of those remaining in the Caverns knew what had happened the day of the disaster might have been avoided had Kili not been appointed Between. It was well known that Menol had opposed her, and most in the Caverns gladly followed him.

"We here in the Caverns have a favor to ask of you and your brother netters. When you venture out into the open sea, we must ask you to do something beyond finding the fish. If we are to survive, the Seadragon must be found. Netters range far from the Caverns, farther than anyone here, and your chances of happening upon the Seadragon are greater. If, by some good fortune, you find him, you must send word." Menol looked at their gnarled hands and the calm light in their eyes. He knew they would help if they could.

"What if we find the dragon? Will the Merra Between go to him?" the older one asked.

Menol had to answer truthfully. "If she is strong enough. She is very weak and has only recently escaped death."

"We'll watch for the dragon," the old netter said. Menol felt some relief knowing that at least something was being done. He noticed that the Merra spoke among themselves, then Arika asked to be recognized. Menol nodded to her.

"We ask too much of the netters already, so I hesitate." The old netter seemed warmed to be spoken to by a Merra and looked eager to please her. "You are aware, Master Netter, that one of the Elders, Groff, has taken most of the guards and waits to attack the Center Place?"

"Yes, Elder, we know," he said.

"First you must take care in your hunt for the Seadragon, for should you come upon this place where Groff and his guards wait, they will probably try to do you harm." Arika was not yet finished. "And all hunters but for the Merra hunters are in his employ."

"We'll be watching for Groff, and you will know of his hiding place if we find him. We will take care that he doesn't sight us first," the netter said, still holding Arika's level gaze. Menol knew her thoughts were turned to the battles ahead.

"You do much for us, master netter, and there is little we can do for you, but should you become trapped, and find a shark as wily as you, this may be of some aid to you." Arika took a large sack from a hook near her drift belt and handed it to him.

"Shark bane!" He looked awed. He knew it by its smell, and knew it was rare.

"It should serve you well," Will said. "There is more at the Merra ruins, tell the other netters." He quietly explained how the bane was used, and the netter looked as if what he held was a miracle.

"We will bring back your fish," the netter said, "and if we're lucky enough to find the dragon—we'll send word." He acknowledged Menol and the Merra Elders with a nod of his gray head. With the bane held carefully in his arms, he and his companion swam out of the chamber toward their impossible task in the open sea.

Menol continued the meeting and had reports from the other Elders. Many of the injured who would ordinarily have died from infection were making good progress, and the Merra were gracious to those healers among the Mogs who wanted to learn.

There were unsettling reports of mutilated bodies found drifting. All knew that Groff's killers lurked in the reefs. His hunters swam as well. Not only did they hunt the location of the Merra Between, but killed netters when they could find them. These murders served two purposes: one to lessen their numbers, and two, to make heartsick those who survived.

They were discussing the notion of curfews versus more patrols when their attention was drawn to the entrance of the chamber, where an agitated guard waited to be admitted. Menol signaled that he enter.

"There's been an accident, High Elder. Braid arch cavern holding wounded has collapsed," the guard said, still breathing hard from his fast journey. Without waiting, Muni and Arika rushed out to take charge of the newest disaster. As the other Elders asked the guard for whatever details he could supply, Menol saw Will frowning and asked him what was wrong.

"The first thing we did was to inspect the caverns for the sick, to be certain they were solid. Braid arch was one of the few that had supports holding up some of the back walls. We may want to be certain there was no tampering," Will said.

Menol clenched his jaw. He knew it was possible. Groff could have saboteurs among them. Menol went with the others to the collapsed cavern. In his mind he found himself yearning for the peace he had found in Elan's arms, so long ago, and for a moment he had a chill. He was suddenly afraid he would never see her again.

Dria's hands worked over the tangles of vine and plucked the ripest sea cucumbers. There was a lull in the storms, though the evil still lurked and could be tasted upon every tongue. Merra travelers who had been at the Caverns had come to the hold of Dria's family for shelter. From them, they learned that the shedragon was dead, the eggs destroyed. The fear about what this would bring could be read in every face.

Dria could feel her disquiet building. There was some invisible calling that beckoned her, and she wanted to answer it. It was as if something very important must be done, and she was needed. It pulled at her day and night.

As she thought of all the others who had already left, she felt angry at her parents. They had not let her go to the Choosing, to sing at the hole. Nor had they let her go to the meeting of the Between and Seadragon. Her mother had had some sense that tragedy would occur, and Dria had been made to stay in the hold with her younger brother. Since her mother had been right, and because of the danger of the storms and marauding sharks, Dria was almost never allowed out.

She pulled the vegetables angrily into her basket. They had no problem feeding the many who lived in the hold. They were of three extended families, and there were several gardens nearby. These were shallow sandy basins, surrounded by natural rock walls. Since they were open to sunlight above, and protected from even the storm waves that had been pounding over them recently, the food was abundant, and they would not starve as they heard many might do in the Caverns. There had been talk among them of sending as much to the Caverns as they could spare. Dria thought it was a good idea and wanted to take it there herself; after all, she had taken pears to the grog master for winters. But they would not discuss it further until they learned more.

They had hunters as well, most of them young males, but they had gone to the Merra ruins near the Caverns. They had answered this mysterious calling, and here was Dria, picking cucumbers.

Carrying as many as they would need for the meal, Dria headed back for the caves. She saw Kirt, a boy a few winters younger than she, carrying his basket of vegetables from a nearby garden. It was their turn today, and somehow the mundane task had deepened Dria's foul mood. At least the day before had been exciting. She had gone with her father, since most of the hunters were gone, and because she was nearly as proficient with a spear as they, to look for a shark that had been lurking about their hold waiting for a Merra meal. Both she and her father had taken net and blades with them, ready to kill the shark. When Dria's father, from the distance, saw that the old shark had been joined by another larger one, he had wanted to turn back. But it was too late. The sharks had sensed their fear and both predators headed for the Merra purposefully.

As the sharks crisscrossed their paths attacking, Dria's father could not keep track of which one was the stronger. Separating so as not to tangle the other's net, Dria and her father simply took the shark that attacked. This was only Dria's second encounter with a hungry shark, and it took her three of the shark's passes to entangle him and to run the blade into its heart. Her father took just moments longer, but he had been most proud of her when they learned that she had dispatched the more powerful of the two killers. Dria sighed. That was yesterday.

She entered the caves and attached her basket to the hooks in the food preparation area. At least it wasn't her day for that boring job. She looked around and saw that no one had returned yet. Perhaps she'd mend the nets the sharks had torn.

It had been dark since the storms had started. With the rare sunlight that filtered in the cave, Dria noticed how beautiful the tapestries shone. Her mother, an artist, had used mollusk and Squid inks, and had woven them winters before of a flaxen reed. Dria had helped to dye the reed above, on a beach, and they had lost very little color when brought down. She had grown so accustomed to the many walls of their living caves being softened by the weavings that she nearly didn't see them. It had been the visitors they had sheltered during the storms, some of them Merra who had lived all their lives in the Caverns, who had gone on endlessly about their beauty. Now that the other Merra drew attention the way they did, she had to admit that the tapestries were quite beautiful. Dria had been so lost in thought on this subject that she did not notice her parents and brother come in.

"Well, it's nice to see you smiling for a change," her mother said.

Her father noticed the large sack of cucumbers on the wall and smiled oddly. "You did very well against that shark, Dria," he said. He had said it before, and Dria smiled in response. He sounded as if he were getting at something, and she began to think it might be something good.

"You and Mother taught me well," she said, waiting.

"We have noticed that you've been less than happy here while others are leaving." He looked to Dria's mother.

"I, ah—" Dria looked at her hands.

"If you feel you must leave, then you should—your father assures me you are more than capable of taking care of yourself," her mother said, as usual wasting no words.

Dria could hardly believe her ears. It must have been yesterday that had convinced her father. She rushed first to her mother, then her father. "Oh, thank you! Thank you—"

"Calm yourself, child," her mother said, and to her mate, "I thought you said she was calm and adult yesterday."

"Stop it," Dria's brother managed to utter as she crushed him too in a grateful hug.

"It's not so much that I don't want to be here. I just want to be out there more, wherever it is. I want to try difficult tasks, things I don't know about. I want to feel as if I'm doing something useful."

"Picking cucumbers is useful," her mother said seriously.

"You know what I mean—but I can take care of myself, so please don't worry about me."

"Oh, we will still worry," her mother said, "but we thought we had better give our permission before you did something foolish, like leave here without our blessings." Her father took her mother's hand. Dria knew they did not want her to go. She felt so grateful, she moved to the cucumbers to start preparing them.

"Shoo, shoo—" Her mother waved her away. "Go see to your sleepnet and your blade, and anything else you will need for the journey. I suppose you will want to leave at the dawn?"

"If that's all right?" Dria looked to them both and they nodded. She hurried to her sleeping nook and gathered the few things she would need. She had always known somehow that in her life there would be a grand adventure.

Inside the garden, the days passed slowly. When Elan was no longer in danger, only one of the Merra stayed with her, usually Minnow, who could hardly bear to leave her side. It was good for Elan, who somehow had come to feel as ancient as the Seadragon, to be near Minnow's enthusiasm.

It was Minnow's duty to make Elan eat. Elan's bones had set, and Issa was satisfied with the way they had mended and surprised at the speed. Even the worst breaks, where bone ends had broken through the surface of the skin, were well on their way. Considering Elan's weakness, Issa considered this nearly a miracle and gave the credit to the garden and the wonderful things that grew there. Issa watched the interaction between the maids, glad she had said nothing to Minnow about the depth of damage to Elan's spirit. With the many other sorrows she bore was the loss of the Squid. They had had no cross-spoken message from him since the day of the massacre.

Minnow was too much in awe of Elan's courage to be impatient at the Between's lethargy, but the young Merra

was often puzzled at Elan's lack of interest in things. Issa knew Elan was aware of disappointing her new friend. Elan was still very weak, and weighed half of what she had when she was at her strongest. The bones in her ribs and shoulders stood out, and the luster of her skin and hair had dulled. Now she was so pale her skin was nearly transparent, and the fine blue veins in her eyelids branched out like sea fans.

"Issa showed me how to make cuttings this morning," Minnow reported excitedly. "I've been putting hundreds of baby plants in shells filled with sand." Elan watched as Minnow did lazy backward circles, too active to be still. "And Tia promised to show me weaving. I know some, but it's not beautiful like Tia makes. When I learn how, I'm going to make more baskets than anyone can count. Tia said we would need them when the Merra start coming for the plants again." Minnow stopped, deciding it was time for Elan to eat sea vegetable. This was less pleasant than the fruit, but Issa said it was better for healing. Nemu brought back fish for her as well, at Issa's request.

"But I just ate," Elan said.

"No, that was a long time ago already—you can eat this," Minnow said. Issa was wise to leave this task to Minnow because Minnow took it seriously, and Elan did not want to disappoint her. Minnow watched as Elan chewed slowly, wishing she knew something she could do that would make the Between happy again. Often Minnow saw Elan's eyes look inward to some distant and sorrowful place; it frightened her. Minnow would wait until Elan felt her watching, then Elan smiled and looked down. "Thank you for taking such good care of me, Minnow," she would say. It was always the same.

When Tia and Issa worked in the garden, taking samples and starting them or finding seed pods, they talked about Elan. That dire threats were in store for the sea concerned them greatly, but their first responsibility was Elan, and they were at a loss to know what to do. Nemu had brought many messages of the progress in the Caverns, and they knew that each time Nemu made the trip, Menol waited to hear some news of Elan.

"It would be good for both of them," Tia said, "and I am certain that Elan still loves him, but this poison lingers."

"It's the dragon dying. Not even Menol could change it," Issa said, pulling the low leaves off a cutting and planting it.

"I think she should see him—we don't know what could come of it. Perhaps something good," Tia said.

"Well, it is certain that what really weakens her gets no better. I think you are right. We'll make a bargain with her," Issa said.

"How can we make a bargain? I haven't heard her say once that she wanted to leave, or even to see Menol."

"We'll make something up," Issa decided, thinking. "I know, we'll tell her that the new Merra Elders wish to speak with her."

"What about Menol?" Tia asked.

"Menol too. We'll tell her she cannot leave the garden until she can swim the distance from one end to the other. Nemu can carry her to them."

"This sounds like no bargain to me," Tia said. "The child can barely hold up a pear."

"We must give her small things to reach for, one small thing at a time," Issa reasoned.

Tia pondered this. "That makes sense, yes, I suppose it could work." They made up a few more details of this plan, and their work done, Issa guided Tia back to Elan's sleepnet. As they approached they heard Minnow humming a song to Elan. It was nice to hear a voice in the garden. Minnow hovered behind Elan, drawing a shell comb through her hair.

Merra, Merra, Merra fair,
Breathing wet, and breathing air,
Split-tail blend with Nemu free,
Both breathe dry, how can it be?
In the Balance, answer true,
Birds with no wings, never flew.
Air is sweetest, in small sips.
The sea is kiss on Merra lips.
Dry world tempts, it may enthrall,
Merras hark, answer the call.
In the Balance, answer true,
Birds with no wings, never flew.
Beyond shores, beneath the sky,
Merra souls are driftwood dry,
Without choice, we cannot yearn.
To the sea, we must return.

Issa was so intent upon guiding Tia that she did not notice a problem around them until she sensed Tia's tenseness. Issa looked across their small clearing at Elan. The frail Merra had lost what little color she had gained and wore a frightened expression. The song Minnow sang was meant to give her comfort and instead was bringing her pain.

"What is it, Elan?" Issa asked. Minnow was startled by the grave quality in Issa's voice and stopped humming. She had not felt Elan's distress until then. Elan seemed unable to answer them. She slowly placed her hand to her throat, her mouth making the shape of the words long before any sound was heard.

"Go ahead, child, tell us what brings you this sorrow," Tia said. Elan still could not speak, and Minnow looked frightened.

"Was it me? What is it, Elan, what?" They waited, watching Elan struggle.

"All this time, I felt an emptiness, I did not know from where it came." Elan's voice was slow, and just a whisper. "It's the songs. There are no songs in me." The others moved closer to comfort her, but she had grown rigid. "When I think of singing, of making a sound, I think nothing will come out—I would scream if I could, but I feel hollow, like a barren cave." Elan's face contorted with her crying. Issa reached for her and held her against her breast, stroking her hair, and talking quietly. Minnow cried too, dry-world tears lost on the sea. She cried for her friend, for whom it seemed there was no comfort.

"Crying is good, Elan. Cry as much as you can. Your voice isn't lost, it's there. You think you have no one to sing to, but there are many who need you as much as the Seadragon does," Issa said.

Elan's voice came in choking bursts. "But I failed him. I should have been able to stop him from going. Now he is in a sea so endless he is lost forever. He goes to his death, I can feel him. He can't find the place, but he will, and I don't hear him."

"He still needs you," Tia tried.

"No—no, he doesn't need me, and he won't let me come to him, he won't call me there," Elan sobbed.

"He won't force his death on you," Issa said.

"But I am Between, and he goes alone." Elan looked at Issa, pleading.

"And you must go alone." Issa looked into her face. "Go on without your dragon."

"But why?" Elan wanted to know.

"Because it is the brave thing to do, and for you there is no other choice," Issa lied to heal her.

"I'm too tired," she whispered, ashamed for having said it.

"You are Betweening for him now," Issa said, "that's why you are so tired."

"I am?" Elan seemed to stop breathing a moment. "Even across the sea?"

"Yes, you are. You share his burdens and his tiredness is yours."

"I'm helping him now?" Elan still could not believe it, except for the fact that she was mortally weak, and it seemed to come from somewhere else.

"The only peace he has now comes from his link with you," Issa said.

Elan pondered this a long time, and could feel Minnow and Tia's concern. They had been shocked at Elan's outburst, but it seemed Issa had been awaiting it. "Does that mean if I get better the dragon could get better?" The hope in her voice was fragile, and Issa knew what hung in the balance here.

"The Seadragon will be changed, if you are stronger. Whether it will save him, I cannot say, but he would know it in the Balance." Issa could feel Elan thinking as she continued to stroke her hair.

"If there were even the smallest chance," Elan murmured.

"We should tell her about the message from the Merra Elders," Tia said, and Issa smiled.

"What message?" Elan asked.

"What message?" Minnow asked.

"Nemu cross-spoke," Issa answered. "The Merra Elders want to meet with Elan, but we told them you were still too weak."

"To meet the Merra Elders?" Elan repeated. The thought never occurred to her.

"Yes," Issa said, "whenever you feel ready to meet them. It might be good for you to taste the open sea for a moment."

"Nemu can take you there to meet them," Tia added.

"I would like to see Menol," Elan whispered.

"She would have to go at night. The danger is greater

than ever with Groff hunting." Minnow was too worried about Elan to be careful of shattering this new spark.

"She could go at night, and Menol will want to send his guard to protect her," Tia said.

"You must get stronger first," Issa told her. "You will frighten Menol and the others if they see you like this." She held up one of Elan's wrists, which were as thin as reeds.

Elan looked at her arm and had the first awareness of herself, of her body. "I could eat something," she said.

Without hesitating, Minnow had fruit and sea vegetable ready. "Good, it's time to eat." Minnow smiled as Elan took it from her dutifully.

Many secret arrangements had been made. Elan was ready to meet the Elders, but she felt slightly overwhelmed. What she was most aware of was her weakness, and her impatience at how little she could do for herself. She had wanted to make the short distance down the passageway by her own power, and Minnow had agreed. But it had been painfully slow, and Elan was exhausted just a short way beyond the crystalline chamber.

Finally she let Minnow take her by the hands and pull her as they had done in the garden. Where once her determination could press her beyond limits that seemed unattainable, now she couldn't swim the length of a passage.

Issa knew it was because the Seadragon's desire to find death was greater than Elan's to live. They tugged at one another, but Elan could not find that small thing, the voice of Ondine in the storm, to focus on. Issa hoped the answer would lie with Menol. He had wanted to meet Elan and not to wait for her, but there had been many reports that convinced him he placed a greater risk on Elan's life if he were to go to her.

It was well known that Groff had the Mog hunters, including Kagor, looking for Elan. He learned from his informants that she had survived her ordeal and he wanted nothing more than to find her. Whether he would try to kill her or to take her for his own use against the Caverns—or even the Seadragon—no one knew, but Groff was desperate to find her. There had been many skirmishes in the Merrra ruins, where he sent his guards to search for her periodically.

Tonight, the Mogs and Merra sent to protect Elan looked no different than many other patrols that ventured out at night around the outer reef. Had Menol been with them, suspicion would surely have been aroused.

"We are almost there," Minnow coaxed Elan. Elan looked ahead at the faint moonlight that fell through the sea fans in the entrance. Minnow was worried that Elan was leaving the garden in such a weakened state, but Issa had made her understand how important it was, and Minnow knew Nemu would protect her with his life.

When Elan reached the entrance, she heard Nemu in cross-speak telling them the way was clear. Minnow pushed the fans aside for Elan and they swam through. When Elan saw the Nemu, her heart swelled with joy. It was the first time they had met since that terrible day. How much she loved him. In the warmth of his eyes was his knowledge of her nearness to death. Seeing him made her miss the Squid terribly.

<My friend,> Elan said, touching him.

<A long journey it has been, Between?> Nemu asked gently.

<Endless,> Elan answered, and traced the wounds he had received from Kagor's blues, protecting her so long ago. <And now we travel together again, Nemu. This makes me glad.> She smiled.

"Please tell us when you have gotten there safely," Minnow said, the concern heavy in her voice. She took a strap and fixed it around Elan's back, attaching it to a harness on the dolphin. Tia had woven it especially for this journey, knowing Elan did not want to be carried, but knowing she did not have the strength to hold on the entire distance.

"Come back as soon as you can," Minnow said.

"Don't worry. Nemu will take good care of me—and watch Tooki," Elan said as they started away. "Make certain he doesn't follow." Minnow waved, and went quickly into the garden again.

Elan felt vague tremors and knew they were some remnant of her instincts for danger, now nearly dormant. She would have to depend on the Nemu entirely, for she could not sense danger, nor did she care about it. Nemu swam steadily beneath her. She knew his quiet loyalty, and she felt sad for him. What a difference there was between him and the free dolphins. Nemu had told her

that since the storms started, he had seen no other dolphin. Unlike the Mogs and Merra, the Nemu could not take shelter, needing to breathe of the air, and were buffeted cruelly by the storms. Nemu guessed they had gone to distant seas, searching out some quiet place.

Nemu lived in the Caverns by choice, to care for Tia, because the Nemu will not live in captivity against their will. Many winters before, the Ghrismogs had tried to keep dolphins for games and transportation. The Nemu simply stopped breathing, choosing to die rather than lose their freedom. Now that Tia would make the garden her home—Elan too, more than likely—the Nemu could take his freedom. He would no longer have to forfeit the thrill of speeding through the water or flying.

<You will be happier when you have none of our burdens to bear, Nemu. It will break my heart when you leave, but I will be happy for you.> Elan pressed her cheek against his side and hugged him close. The Nemu was silent a long time.

<This Nemu happy is,> he said quietly.

<There is a wide ocean beyond this sad place, with turquoise water and white sand and fat fishes to eat.> Elan felt the Nemu's powerful muscles taking her forward, to Menol.

<For those things, time there is—when our hearts allow, this Nemu can fly,> Nemu said, and then was silent again, alert for any dangers in their path, near or distant. Elan was gladdened by his closeness, and by his love for her. She was lucky, she knew, to have been loved by so many—Maadu and Minnow, Issa and Tia, the Squid and Nemu and Menol. She felt she betrayed them because in return she could give them nothing. Inside her was a void, nothing more than a ghostly echo of what had been important to her. Elan and Nemu heard the cross-speak greeting from the Merra guards that waited. Soon they could see each other in the gloom of the night water.

When Elan reached them, the way they looked at her seemed odd. She felt as if she had been asleep for moons, and when she awoke, befuddled and dreamy, strangers stared at her, their eyes filled with wonder and warmth, as if they knew her. Five seemed like a hundred, and their loyalty to her was unquestionable.

"Thank you for meeting us," Elan said, and the two head guards, one Merra one Mog, both made the sign of

respect and called her *Between*. They too had been there the day Elan faced the Seadragon, and they revered her for her courage as they did the bravest warrior.

"May we take you now?" the Merra asked.

"The less time exposed, the better," the Mog added.

"We go then," Elan said, and the Nemu started out again. Elan was nearly limp across his back, and she was glad for the darkness, for all her strength was taken in simply interacting with the guards.

The rest of the passage to the Merra ruins was uneventful. The plan was that the guards would patrol the ruins and that Nemu would take Elan to the entrance of the room of the Merra dance where Menol would be waiting for her. They knew that was most protected and easily defended. She would speak with Menol before she saw the Elders.

When Elan opened her eyes, she thought she recognized the seascape that surrounded the Merra ruins—a coral arch, the flat rocks and mussel beds. But much of the sand had been blown away on the storms, and new rock shapes appeared that had lain hidden for centuries.

They slowed in a covered area and waited while two of the guards swam ahead to make certain there was no ambush. When they returned, they escorted Elan and Nemu into the Merra ruins, and from that point they separated. Nemu took Elan to the room, and the guards patrolled.

It was so dark as they approached the entrance, Elan wondered if her sight were as weakened as she was, because the blackness was a blanket. Nemu seemed to know where he was going, and very soon he slowed. Elan worried that she felt no flutter of excitement at the thought of seeing Menol again, and she hoped that in the darkness, he would not be able to see the distance she knew must be in her eyes.

Nemu stopped, and Elan recognized the entrance to the passageway. Immediately from the shadows emerged Menol.

"Elan, *Between*—and Nemu—you are safe," he said, moving at once to her side. He laid his cheek gently against hers a moment, then helped remove the strap Tia had woven. When Elan drifted freely, held by Menol, Nemu left quickly to protect them, and to circle the ruin.

<Thank you, Nemu,> Elan called in cross-speak as they disappeared inside.

In the darkness of the passage, Elan could feel Menol's warmth radiating from his body. He seemed to have grown larger and stronger. Both of them had so much to say they were silent.

Elan felt a new sadness creep into her when she entered the room. Nothing had changed, the thick mossy walls, velvet soft, and the rose-colored light that illuminated the room mysteriously. The last time they had been here they had been delirious with life and pleasure; now it was different.

Menol pulled her to him gently and wrapped his arms around her. To him it was more like a dream, after waiting so long, to at last smell her sweetness and feel her skin against his own. He looked down at her red-gold hair, her head upon his chest, and waiting for the tightness in his throat to pass, he felt the quiet tremors of her crying—or was it him?

When Menol had heard from the Merra healer that Elan was close to death, and the report seemed never to change, he had a difficult time believing. Despite how broken she had been when he found her, he had not seen her bound to a rampaging Seadragon; he could only remember her as being strong and vital. Even when the Merra Elders had warned him privately that she was lucky to live at all, if what they suspected was true, that she had opened to the Seadragon in his fury. They knew that she must have, to have kept the dragon from killing himself against the rocks of the Center Place. If she lived, they said, she would not be the same. Despite all the evidence, he had still felt their predictions overly gloomy.

But now Menol believed them, and it tore his heart. In his arms she felt frail and small. Where her shoulders once had been broad and strong, they were now like a child's, and her flesh, once vibrant with life, now barely covered her bones.

Menol felt sick knowing how much she had had to bear and that he had not been there to protect her. Often enough they had told him that her fate was too closely woven with the Seadragon's, and in Menol's arms was the result of what had become of the Balance.

But even the Merra Elders may not have believed what they said, for the news Menol had been most excited to deliver now was useless. They had devised a plan to look

for the Seadragon. The sea was so vast that even a creature as large as the Seadragon could become lost forever. But Arika and Muni and the others had known their only hope would be to find the giant, and for that the plan greatly depended on Elan. Word had mysteriously spread to the open sea, and between each storm more and more Merras arrived. As they had come together to sing around the abyss, so they came together now for a far more difficult task. The Between and the Seadragon both must be called back. But as Menol held Elan in his arms, he knew they had already asked too much of her. She felt more broken now than she had when he had found her. The Merras had been right; her fate was the Seadragon's and the Seadragon wanted to die.

Menol stroked Elan's hair and had a dreadful thought. If they didn't ask her to help them find the Seadragon, the task would be impossible. The Seadragon would go to his death before they could find him, and with him would go Elan. There was no way to save her.

She pulled away and looked up at him. She was still luminous, and her beauty was somehow enhanced by the unfathomable depths of what she had seen in the dragon's eye, now echoed in her own.

"Has it been difficult for you without Edam? Trying to save the Caverns from the storms?" Elan asked quietly.

"Not as difficult as it has been waiting to see you," Menol answered.

Elan knew as she looked at his handsome face that she had missed him more than she realized. "And Groff? No one has found where he hides with the guards?" She had learned this from Nemu.

"No, the Merras hunters search, but he and his guards stay hidden in some hole—probably put some poor eel out of its cave," Menol said, and was glad to see Elan smile. It lasted just a short time before she became pensive again.

"The Merras on the new council are winning the respect of all who work with them. They are wise and calm, and in the midst of each new crisis, I am grateful they agreed to help us." Elan's interest returned with his words. "There is one maid among them who would make a very fine leader. They are anxious to meet you." Menol stroked her hair again and was silent. He wrestled with himself, not wanting to tell her of the Merras' plan to

search for the Seadragon. It seemed cruel. They would have to find some other way, for the plan had been devised without knowing the extent of the Between's weakness.

Elan sensed his uneasiness. "What is it?" she asked.

Menol hesitated, knowing he had no choice. "The whole time you have been lying near death, each time there was a lull in the storms, many hundreds of Merra arrived."

"Hundreds?" Elan asked.

"Many more than anyone thought still existed," Menol said.

"Was there a city of them someplace distant?" Elan asked.

"I don't think so. Ollon said they always knew it was too dangerous to congregate in one place. They would invite attack. No, they have come from everywhere."

"Why?" Elan was curious now. She had a distant joy that there were many Merra, but she thought sadly that it was too late. Without the Seadragon, life would never be as it had been. There would be no time for beauty, only survival.

"They come, I think, for you," Menol said carefully.

"What do you mean, why would they come for me?" Elan stared.

"Because you are Between, and because the Caverns are their homes, and were for centuries before they were driven away—and because they want to search for the Seadragon before he finds his death."

Elan's eyes widened and she gripped his arm. "They dream of swimming the world around to find him?"

"They do—and they have a plan," Menol went on as Elan stared away, stunned. Was it her weakness that never allowed her to dream this? She had known it impossible, not only because the sea was vast, but because the Seadragon did not want to be found. But there were others, many others, who believed differently.

"They really believe this could be done?" Elan looked closely at Menol for any sign of doubt.

"They speak of it constantly. They plan to have the Merra spread out singly in search patterns, each covering similar distances, but no one searching the same area. They would communicate by cross-speaking, checking on each other's safety, all the while cross-speaking with other

creatures to see if there had been any sightings," Menol said. The weakness of the plan, of course, was that it could take winters, and by that time the Seadragon could be long dead. An even greater difficulty was that the plan depended on Elan. They knew Elan, as Between, was the one most likely to sense the Seadragon, to follow his invisible beacon as the deep divers followed the glowfish in black depths. It worried Menol, the fevered light that had entered Elan's eyes. He sensed how hearing of the Merra and their plan had changed something in her. It made her frailty all the more painful to look upon, this sudden purpose that stiffened her bearing. Going on a search in the open sea, as weak as she was, would kill her as certainly as the dragon's death would.

"You could stay in your place of healing, listening for the voice of the Seadragon, and you could cross-speak to the searchers," Menol tried.

"Is that part of their plan?" Elan asked, knowing it wasn't.

"They thought you would be stronger. Had they known, they would have been as ashamed as I am to speak of this plan." Menol held her to him as tightly as he dared.

"I haven't heard his calling yet, but perhaps if I go to him—oh Menol, that they even dream," was all she could repeat.

"Elan, how can you think this? You feel as if you will break in my arms. I can feel you leaving before you are gone."

"The Seadragon goes to his death whether I die in the trying or not. And you know, and that so many believe has made me know, that at least I must try." Menol only stared at her and mourned. "When had they hoped to begin?" Elan asked.

"They wait to speak of it with you." Menol felt the wrenching at his insides. "Elan, do you remember when I promised you, so long ago, that I would protect you? I've failed. I can't, it—I don't want you to leave."

"You know they'd never find him unless I go." She pulled away to look into his face. Menol was surprised by the radiance of her smile. "It was a bold promise for you to make, that you would protect me. We have our own tasks, you and I," she said. "You could not yet leave the Caverns, could you?" She knew he could not.

"It would be asking too much of Arika, that she lead,

yet soon she will be ready. First I must make everyone as safe as I can. Then there is Groff to see to. But I will not stay there. You couldn't wait until I can go with you?"

Elan looked out past the walls of the Merra room, past the ruins and toward the open sea. "I'm afraid to wait," she whispered. "He still lives. I can feel it, but we have no time for waiting. His death is slow." She looked imploringly at him. "They need me—and Menol, they actually believe this is possible."

"But it is too dangerous, and it is possible without you traveling open seas, with Groff and all his hunters determined to have you dead with the dragon." Menol had been afraid to harm her more by telling her how desperately they searched. Even now he waited for Groff's men to find them, and attack.

"Menol, I know why you worry, but you don't know that with this you have given me what Issa said no one else could." Elan thought a moment. "I don't know if I believe it is possible to find him, but that the Merra believe it is, and that they need me, is song enough in this storm."

Elan hugged Menol, and despite the new life she felt, her sadness still clung. No, she didn't really believe it was possible to find the Seadragon before he found his abyss, but it was better to try than to await the end. She knew this lack of belief and deadness in her were one. She knew it by the feel of Menol's arms around her. For though she remembered her thrill at having been touched by him, inside her there was no stirring. None at all. Now there would be only one thing for her. This search. It would be enough, she thought, it would have to be.

22

The Calling



Elan was able to swim, Menol holding her, to the yellow cave where the Merra Elders waited. Though the night was dark, she felt the protective nearness of Nemu and the guards. In the pale light of the stars, she could see Menol, could see his profound sorrow. Before she entered to meet the Elders, she faced him, her hands upon his shoulders. Somehow, she must convince him.

"If I stay here, Menol, I am half-alive. The last of all the Seadragons is out there, and with him I go. If I can bring him back, then I will have done what a Between should." He looked away. "You know that I must." Her voice was so soft Menol could hardly hear it, but the truth of what she said hurt him, and filled him anew with his feelings of loss. His future would be one of the overwhelming sadness of loving her and not being able to touch her. When Elan looked into his eyes, she knew she had to offer him something to calm his fears.

"I can do this—I will promise you not to leave until Issa says I am strong enough," she tried.

"And if you must go, then you will have guards. At least fifty," he said firmly.

"Fifty?" Elan asked.

"Yes, fifty—more will want to go," Menol said, thinking.

"If you say I must, but I think they are more needed here—or in the search," Elan protested, but at last she nodded. She could see that this concession gave him little comfort. She put her arms around him again and laid her head against his chest. His arms circled her carefully. She could hear his great heart beating and knew that his torment was that though he loved her, he could not keep harm away.

They entered the chamber where the Elders waited, and all of them swam to her. Elan greeted them, grateful to Menol for staying close enough for her to hold on to for support.

"Elan, this is Arika, Muni, Will, and Ollon," Menol said. Elan raised the backs of her fingertips to her forehead. To her, they looked kind and proud. She felt a tightness in her chest, a keen ache of kinship. She shared her blood with these Merra. They made her feel rich and strong in spirit. As Menol introduced each of them to Elan, he could see beyond that their admiration was shock at her frailty. They had the same doubts he had, and though it was against his real desires, he would help Elan convince them of her ability to join them in their plan. He would do it because Elan wanted it.

"Though our Between would like to stay longer, and we are honored to have her here, we must keep this time with her short." Menol saw their puzzled but accepting glances. "We can trust that Groff will soon be learning Elan is near the Caverns. We want her into sanctuary again as soon as possible."

"The High Elder has told me of your plan, and I would consider it an honor to be part of it," Elan addressed the Merra.

"We have a better chance of succeeding if you are well enough to lead it, Between," Ollon said, his comment both a statement and question.

"I will be well enough, I promise you."

"Craftsmen rebuild the Merra ruins," Will said, "and many Merra who will search are collecting there. They choose leaders among themselves, and they will take territories to search with which they are familiar."

"He has called to you, Between?" Arika asked softly.

"No, I have not heard him." Elan looked at Muni and Arika.

"Perhaps, from the open sea, your calling or your song might awaken in him some desire to live, or at least cause him to raise his voice against the dark," Will said. Elan only nodded. Her most bitter despair—and she could not tell them or their hopes might turn as bleak as hers—was that inside she was dead, that there were no songs in her.

Weakness overtook her. The impatience she felt was the Nemu's, still guarding just outside the chamber. He didn't like it here and wanted Elan back in the sanctuary

of the garden, where he knew he could protect her. A glance at Menol, and she knew he held the same thoughts.

"So much has changed for us in a short time," Elan said to the Merra Elders. She knew they would understand she meant their status in the Caverns, but she thought of her own sudden desire to believe they could find the Seadragon. She felt a remnant of dormant purpose fluttering, and hoped it was not too fragile to maintain.

"You must make yourself well, Between," Arika said.

Elan knew by the tone of her voice that the other Merras were more concerned for her health than for their plan, and she nodded with what little strength remained to her. "It is good to know there are so many of us left, and I am made more proud by the wisdom I see in your eyes." She touched Arika and Will's shoulders and looked into each of their faces. The strength of purpose she saw made her feel like an imposter. She tried to repress all doubt about their prospects for success, hoping they did not sense it in her. The long silence was broken when Menol called her name.

"Elan?"

"You must go, Between," Ollon said.

"When we have finished all the details of the plan, we will meet with you again." Muni smiled.

Menol put one arm around her waist to guide her and felt her trembling. Elan was at the end of her strength.

"Good-bye," Elan managed.

"Farewell, Merra Between," the Elders said. Menol guided her to the entrance of the yellow cave where Nemu already waited. The dolphin was still as Menol fastened Elan into her traveling strap. Elan said nothing, only laying her cheek against Nemu's back and feeling Menol's hand upon her as they swam together.

Outside they found a new guard, now twenty Mogs and Merra. All of them looked very fine in their woven shell shirts and arm guards as they surrounded her and started toward the open sea.

Menol was informed that there had been attacks at the far side of the Merra ruins. He wanted Elan returned to her secret place of healing. As they swam, he glanced often at her. She was asleep upon the back of the dolphin, her coppery hair streaming behind her. She was so changed. He wondered if she knew it herself when she promised the Merra Elders she would be well.

They swam for some time, the Nemu leading the way. The guards allowed Elan her privacy, keeping their eyes ahead and their weapons ready as they traveled. Menol looked at Dehtu, his head Mog guard, and noted his resolve. He remembered having fought beside him during Groff's ambush.

They reached a section of reef, and the Nemu slowed. Elan awoke and looked hurriedly for Menol. He took her hand and assured her all was well.

Though Menol did not like leaving Nemu alone in charge of Elan's safety from this point on, he agreed it was safer that no one knew her whereabouts. The Nemu assured the head Merra guard, with whom he cross-spoke, that it was not far, and all agreed that they sensed no danger. The Merra guard passed the information to Dehtu, who looked reluctant to let her go as well.

Menol kissed her. She clung to his hand as long as she could before the Nemu was away again with speed.

Menol watched a moment, then turned with the guards to swim back to the Center Place. All he could wonder about was how it had come to pass that the Balance had placed such an impossible burden upon shoulders so frail.

Groff looked around him, surveying the fortress he was creating. It would be exactly as he wanted it, and everyone in it would do as he commanded because they feared him. He had the Mog hunters to do his bidding, and he paid Kagor dearly to instill that obedience.

Most would follow out of greed. It was ironic, Groff thought. In the Caverns he had become the most wealthy of Mogs with ease. He controlled a portion of every type of commerce and his wealth bought him more control. Yet those that followed him by the hundreds were for the most part soldiers who had little and wanted more. Groff had convinced them that if they followed him, and obeyed him, they would have more. In the Caverns they had been treated unfairly by the rich, looked down upon. In this new city it would be different, or so Groff promised. How easy it was. Greed made them believe anything. Always Groff would give them a little more than they needed and make sure he had them in as much bondage as he could devise. When he had supplied them with their needs, they found themselves with nothing but what they owed and would always owe Groff.

The system of caves he was turning into his own Caverns was well protected and nearly invisible. They had been discovered by one of Groff's hunters winters before, and their whereabouts had always been kept secret.

Now he made good use of them. They were less than a five-day swim from the Caverns, and the Mog guards who had come with him worked hard to try to win the honor of entering Groff's elite and well-compensated honor guard.

Now the caves were busy with activity. Some of the guards had brought maids. They had become good at gathering food, the scarcity of which was their only real problem here. Some of them had found beds nearby that had not been destroyed by the storms, and others of them, resourceful additions to the new cave city, had begun making raids on the new beds around the Caverns. They were becoming extremely adept at making their stealing look like storm damage.

Most who had followed had no loyalty to the Caverns. Groff had convinced his hunters and the heads of his guard that the real prize was to retake the Caverns. The best caves they would claim as their own, and no longer would they have to take what was handed to them. All around him weapon makers were busy fashioning blades and harpoons like the netters used from sharpened fish bones. Groff knew he had all the time he needed to make himself and his armies ready. While Menol was buried beneath the rubble, along with thousands of helpless cave dwellers, Groff had time to attack another more distant hold if he desired, without the cowards among the other Elders keeping him from what he wanted. Of the conquered he knew how to make new allies, and no matter how Menol prepared, or whether the Merra Between was there to aid him, there would be no saving the Caverns from Groff. He had only to bide his time, stay hidden, and make his plans well.

Groff had never felt so satisfied. As they prepared to attack the Caverns, his spies in the Grand Chamber were finding out every detail that could be useful to his campaign. One of the Elders still belonged to him, and as long as Groff had him, Menol's every move would be reported.

The only detail of his plan that continually frustrated Groff was his hunters' inability to find the location of the

Merra Between. Kagor had been away for the last half-moon looking, and on another task of which he would say nothing. Though he would never admit it, Groff feared Kagor more than ever. Something had changed the hunter since the death of the shedragon. At least that was the event Groff thought had changed him. The Mog was a dark mystery. So uncontrollable. Groff tried to imagine the worst. What if Kagor tried to take control? He seemed as uninterested in power as he did in wealth. Yet he took the mountains of pearls Groff paid him. Groff always knew that if Kagor became a problem to him, he could set his other hunters and their blues against him, for they would like to be paid the fortunes Kagor was paid for the same deeds.

Groff had had his honor guard stage battles with blues. He wanted them well trained when they protected him. He had no intention of facing Kagor or anyone else.

All the winters that Kagor had spent in the open sea, training his blues to one mind, had transformed him. He had become an extension of his beasts. The sharks were efficient killers, so perfect they had remained unchanged since the beginning of time. The only difference between the master and his beasts, Groff had learned, was that the sharks derived no sensual pleasure from the torment and deaths of their prey. Groff had heard that Kagor often ate his victims, making his sharks wait. Groff's thoughts wandered again to the moment of Kagor's violent conception. That could be the only answer, unless the Merra had poisoned him somehow.

Groff had gotten word from his sources in the Caverns that the Merra planned to seek the Seadragon. He suspected that Kagor was looking for some clue to the giant's whereabouts. Groff was certain the Elders would include the Merra Elan in on their plan, and he wished that Kagor would return before they, the Merra Between included, started off on their quest. Following her would be the simplest route to the Seadragon. Groff believed what he heard, that because she had opened to the ancient creature, and because she was his Between, she would be the one most likely to be led to him. He didn't care how the Seadragon was found, but he knew that if he had control of the Between, he would also control the Seadragon.

When Menol's best guards left with the Merra to look

for the Seadragon, Groff would simply send his best hunters. The sharks would slowly pick off the escort, one by one, and when the Merra Between was left alone, she could see what sorts of powers she thought she had. Groff twisted his pearl ring and scowled. He couldn't understand why they hadn't been able to find her hiding place. It would be so much easier to take her while she was still weak. Groff had gotten the same reports as had the Elders. He knew she was still very sick. He looked out into the open sea and cursed Kagor. The hunter was too independent, and Groff wanted him back in time to follow her.

Elan knew she had returned to the garden. She knew that she was sleeping off her exhaustion and that she was having a bad dream, but she could not make herself wake to escape the fear. She was caught in a wave as high as a mountain. The froth on its savage peak mingled with the clouds. The spray stung her as she was hurled from the wave at its summit. She seemed suspended high in the air, and she began to fall. Her speed down toward the craggy beach built until she was nearly blinded. Below her, other dead creatures were scattered between the rocks. She screamed, the falling lasting much longer than it should. The sound of her terror became the screech of the wind. She screamed until she had no strength or breath left in her, and what fell around her was not the wave, or pain, but arms.

Minnow held Elan closely and cried. Elan's terror was so real, the young Merra was swept away by it. Tia and Issa had gone to plant more cuttings, but they would return, Minnow was certain. Elan's screams were loud enough to slice through the walls of the garden. Minnow had been left to watch Elan as she rested. The trip to see Menol and the Elders had been too taxing. She had slept the whole day and night. The dream had taken Elan just after dawn, after Tia and Issa had left for their work.

Elan felt Minnow clinging to her. With the small fragment of reason that had escaped her terror, she knew the dream was some part of her, horrified at the inescapable ordeal that awaited. In the stillness, feeling Minnow's arms still hugging her protectively, Elan welcomed an odd serenity. Knowing she had no other choice simplified her future. Elan heard her breathing calm and felt Minnow's protective hold of her soften.

"It's all right now, Minnow," she said, "it's gone." Minnow finally let her go and looked at her, her eyes wide with fright. Elan smiled, and Minnow grew calm as well. Tia and Issa swam back to the overhang. When they sensed Elan's danger was under control, they quietly listened.

Elan said, "I have something very important to tell you. And there is a task for which I will need your help—more than I have asked already."

"You need only speak it, Between," Minnow said quietly.

"The Merra Elders have a plan to search for the Seadragon—many gather for this purpose. We cannot disappoint them." Elan looked at her healers, then into Minnow's sweet face.

"You will go on this search?" Minnow asked.

"Yes, and I must be well for it. It will not be easy, but will you all help me?"

Minnow took both of Elan's hands and smiled. "We could do nothing else."

Reena wished she could have told Menol her plan. She was determined to do her part in this battle, and she knew her plan was a sound one. She swam in the shadows of a wall and watched as yet more Mogs came out of the gathering hole. She could see which ones had had too much grog. These sang loudly and out of tune, and often bumped into the walls of the passages as they tried to swim home. Some were pushed out for fighting. Three were leaving together, and knowing it would be unsafe to approach three Mog guards, she settled back deeper into the shadows.

The night was getting late. She thought of the two earlier guards she had approached, and something in her soared as she remembered their vehement refusals of her requests. Reena warned herself that she would have to be careful with her thoughts now. If she wanted to go through with this, she had to convince herself first. Her plan depended on it. Otherwise, how could she convince a wavering guard to leave the Caverns and take her to where Groff built his attack?

As the three guards swam loudly down the passages, Reena felt a renewed surge of purpose. The part of her that was Merra was aware of the calling that had gone

out. There was something important to be done, and many could feel it. Reena had learned from Menol that the Merra planned a massive search for the Seadragon. Countless numbers of volunteers would be needed, and Reena did not think she would be able to learn cross-speaking soon enough to be of any use. She knew there had to be something she could do to help. Those who lived in the open sea and the Caverns alike felt the shadow descend over all of them. She had thought for many days about what her part might be, and as she listened to Menol one morning, she formed her plan. It was dangerous, but who among them was not facing danger? Menol knew that even with the help of the Merra and the new weapons they were making, Groff had the advantage. Menol had said that none of his hunters or netters had been able to find Groff's place of hiding. It seemed absurd, nearly five hundred guards hidden somewhere. Reena had asked a few questions, then slowly worked out the details of her plan.

She told no one but her younger sister. Reena had no doubt what Menol's reaction would be. Neither he nor her family would have let her attempt it. That was one reason they could not know. The other was more painful. If Reena were to be convincing in the role of a maid who left to join Groff and his attackers, even her family had to think her a traitor. Her sister would know, so after Reena was entrenched among the enemy, Luana could tell Menol the truth, but no one else.

Reena heard a guard being forced from the gathering hole and drew back as two guards threw a third one out.

"You know where to go, it sounds! Why don't you join the rest of your greedy friends?" the two shouted.

"That I'll do you fish-shit scum! We'll be back all right, and when we come, yours'll be the first heads I take." The Mog guard's words were slurred and threatening. He swam unsteadily away, and Reena followed at a distance until they were in a deserted section of passageways. She circled around in front of him and settled herself into a cranny to await his approach. When she heard him, she began to cry loudly.

He was full of his own problems and mumbling so steadily to himself that he swam past her. She had to wail before he finally heard her. He came back because she was beautiful, not because he wanted to help her.

"What's the problem, maid? Radna bones, what a racket you make." He tried to pull Reena's hands away from her face. She finally peered out.

"Everyone here is weak—they feel more and more like my enemies instead of friends," Reena said.

"Don't I know that well enough," the guard mumbled.

"When I tell anyone I want to leave here, they call me a traitor. My brother went, why can't I go too?"

"Where did your brother go?" The guard studied her with his small eyes.

Reena detected the suspicion in his voice. "How do I know I can trust you?" she asked, just as suspicious.

"You can trust me because I say so." The guard's interest grew as he noted just how pretty Reena was.

"Well, my brother went—he went with the others." In a whisper she added, "He went with Groff." Reena buried her face in her hands again, crying.

"He left you behind?" The guard looked around to see if anyone listened to them.

"He didn't want to, but he said it would be unsafe for me to be around that many guards without mates, and that he would come back for me. But I think he's forgotten me. Oh, what can I do? I would go there but I don't know how to get there by myself—and I'm afraid." Reena went on and on, her stomach tightening as the Mog's large hand stroked her hair, dropping, when he thought it safe, to her shoulders and breast.

"No more crying—come on. Much better things to do than cry, little maid," the guard said.

"But what will I do? I don't belong here anymore—no one cares about me." Reena continued to cry.

"Something might be done," the Mog said, and looked into the darkness, in the direction of his small and bare living cave. He had a mate there and a child. The same mate who did not want him to go with Groff in the first place. He looked down again at the beautiful maid. "Someone could take you there."

Reena looked up at the gleam in his eye, and knew avoiding him was not going to be easy. He was no smarter than a stone clam, but he was much stronger than she was. "Someone could?" she acted. "Do you mean you could? How do you know the way? I have been asking everyone."

"You have not been asking the right ones then, have you, pretty?"

"So you will take me? You will?"

"Well—I suppose I could—but things'd have to be arranged."

"What things?" Reena asked. "I want to go now. The sooner we leave this broken place, the better."

"But we need sleepnets and provisions," he said.

Reena held up her woven bag for him to see. It was too dark in the moonlight, but she let him feel the weight of it. She knew that once started, she could not allow her guide to lose interest. "I have two sleepnets—and food. I even have grog." She had more grog than anything else, and she made certain it was strong. She was depending upon it to make the Mog more sleepy than amorous.

The guard hesitated a moment, everything moving too fast for him. Reena thought it was a good time to cry again, and did. She even clung to his hand for emphasis.

"That's enough crying now—shut up, will you?" The guard looked around. "I'll go, I'll go," he said, petting her hair.

"We can leave now?" Reena asked.

The Mog laughed nervously at first, then his chest puffed out. "Nothing keeping us here, pretty maid—nothing at all."

"What's your name?" Reena asked.

"My what?"

"Your name—what are you called?"

"I'm called Jegga," he said, still looking around.

Reena rose from the shadowy hollow and swam before him. This was the first time he had seen the full length of her in the moonlight, and his eyes grew wide. "You won't be sorry, Jegga," she said.

"That I won't."

"I think we should start now, don't you? The more distance we can put between us and the Caverns before light, the safer it will be." Reena started to swim, hoping he was not too full of grog to remember the way in the dark, and hoping he would get her there before she had to use the blade she had brought.

23

Maelstrom



The same afternoon Elan awakened from her terrible dream, she and Minnow worked out the details of what would be her difficult journey back to health. They began slowly. Each day Elan worked as long as she could, then slept. She asked that Minnow wake her after only a short time, and the work would begin again. Even as it grew dark, when the Merra had taken to resting within the confines of their sleepnets and talking or weaving the carrying baskets for the distant gardens, Elan continued lifting small rocks to build strength in her arms. She was never still, except when sleeping, and Minnow had to think hard to find ways to push Elan more than Elan pushed herself.

Tia and Issa kept their doubts to themselves. Their feelings were mixed between great joy that Elan was at least nearer herself in spirit, and fear that the task she and the Merra took on was not only too dangerous, but futile as well.

Tia and Issa had, on occasion, pondered the possibility of finding the Seadragon while Elan lay near her death. That, of course, would have solved much of their difficulty in healing her, but the Merra were well aware of the limitless reaches of the sea. A search such as the one the Elders, and now Elan, considered could take winters. What it did was to expose Elan to the open sea, the dangers of which were adequate enough to supply countless varieties of deaths, but with Groff and his hunters anxious to have her, the dangers multiplied. Issa and Tia were quietly wrestling with their own dilemmas. How could they discourage Elan when they had sent her to see

Menol and the Elders, hoping she would find the spark she needed?

Now that the Between had made up her mind, all Tia and Issa could do was to aid her in what ways they could. Elan told Issa the bargain she had made with Menol to be well, and Issa knew Elan would keep the promise. They were all too aware how little time they had.

It had been just over one moon since the Seadragon had spent his rage and disappeared. Elan knew in her heart he was not yet dead, but she was afraid that every moment they delayed made their task more impossible. This was what made her push herself beyond limits day after day.

There were times when Issa saw how hard Elan worked, and she worried that Elan would make too great a demand upon weakened muscles or bones. The healer feared the wounds would rip or the bones break again. If that happened, their prospects looked even more bleak. But Elan's determination allowed her recognition of her limits, and she pressed just beyond them from the first light of dawn until darkness passed.

Minnow's devotion to Elan's goal was equally fierce. Minnow made it her duty, since Elan had to eat the entire day, to find her new things, or new combinations, which would help break the burden of having to eat when she felt no hunger.

At first their attempts to build Elan's strength in even the simplest of movements were frustrating. Elan could not swim from one end of the garden to the other without help, so Minnow took her by the hands and pulled just slightly as Elan kicked. Once across, Elan would have to rest. The next trip would leave her exhausted, but she wanted to go again, and then again. The whole day was spent thus, and the following day Elan would swim across just using her arms to pull her, without kicking her tail. Minnow guided Elan slightly, continuously brought her food, and encouraged her with teasing and compliments.

Elan often got angry at herself when a tired muscle would not respond to her will. She would make herself calm and start again. The length of the garden, one end to the other, became the length of the sea. After many days of work, she could at last swim across once by herself. A few days later she could swim it several times

without rest. Then she would try it just using her arms, then just her tail. At night Tia massaged exhausted muscles.

When she could swim half the day with little rest, slowly, then Minnow brought her up into the domed chamber above the garden. Here, on the beaches, Elan made all the motions of swimming, but with the added weight of the dry air pressing down on her. When she could maintain this for long durations, Minnow put rocks in her hands to make the task even more difficult.

Elan could feel the strength returning, and there were times, in the early morning, when she actually felt hunger. She listened each night, before her dreams came, to hear the voice of the dragon, but there was no calling. She had profoundly hoped that the Seadragon would feel her new purpose. But she would not let the silence slow her, and she would start again at dawn.

Minnow and Elan developed a chasing game. Minnow would start out just ahead of Elan and they would race from one end of the garden to the other, from the surface down and up until they were dizzy and laughing. At first Minnow would call out to Elan that she would never catch her. And in truth, Elan used all her strength trying, but as more days passed, she found that Minnow hardly called to her at all, and in fact had to take more and more of a head start. As this game continued Issa and Tia began to believe that Elan might be well after all. They could not deny that she was still changed; her eyes were filled with a fathomless sorrow, but in her laughter, as she chased Minnow, and as Tooki joined in the game, they heard promise.

Minnow devised a new task that Elan liked, and disliked, most of all. There was a progression of stones, the smallest the weight of a child, the largest more than Elan's weight. Minnow did the task with Elan and they competed.

Picking the rock up, they had to swim to the surface with it before they let it drop. The smaller rocks were very difficult, and when they started this game, neither of them could budge the larger rocks. But as more days passed, they were able to reach fingers beneath the craggy chunks of stone, and straining every muscle, they whipped their tails into a frenzy of motion and strength. Minnow could not carry the two largest stones, but Elan pushed

herself to lift them until they could find no larger stone to challenge her. It was during the half-moon at this game that Elan knew she was ready. Massaging each night, Tia felt the strength grow beneath her hands. All said it was a miracle of the garden, and of Elan's determination.

Elan would not ask Issa for permission to leave, for it was Issa's decision. But she and Minnow knew it would be soon. She had been working herself nonstop for more than a moon, and Elan weighed more now than she had when she had met the dragon, for her new strength was in long and gracefully hard muscles. The huge rocks the maids carried to the surface dropped incessantly, *clunk clunk thump* all the days over. Issa and Tia were worn to a frazzle with the constant motion.

One evening, the Merra had stopped their work to take their meals together. Elan could eat twice what the others did now, and without effort. She felt the expectation and knew that Issa had been watching her closely. She was anxious to leave, but she trusted Issa's judgment. For the past many days, she had sent messages to Menol by way of Nemu to tell him it would be soon. The Merra Elders had sent word back that the plan was ready, and had given Elan the beginning details.

Issa looked at the young Between in the fading light of dusk. They had not had any storms for nearly half a moon, and they felt none approaching.

Before coming to the garden, Issa had lived in a small hold of Merra a great distance from the Caverns. Some of the young Merra males and maids would range far for food and exploring. At times, bands of sharks, or aggressive barracuda, raided their hold. Merra were a convenient source of food. This situation often led to the young Merra getting ready for battle with the predators as they would have for any enemy. Issa had always been impressed by the power these young warriors emanated, and as she looked at Elan she saw the same readiness. Elan's luminous quality had returned, perhaps not to its fullest capacity, which she had had when she was more in union with the dragon, but a radiance with a sharper edge. Her purpose made her burn with a different light, less peaceful, more fervent.

Issa saw Elan looking at her and waiting. Elan was too solemn to smile and too anxious to begin her quest.

"Yes, Between, you are strong"—Issa said what they

were all thinking—"and as soon as you complete one more task for me, and for you, you will be ready to search for your dragon."

"What is it?" Elan asked, ready to do whatever she must.

"You have been too protected in the garden, and you remember well how important it is that your instincts are as well tuned as your muscles?"

"Yes, I do remember," Elan said.

"I want you to take a trip, two days, three—however long you feel it will take. Take Nemu with you, and Minnow too, if she wants to go," Issa said, knowing that if she allowed the young Merra to go, perhaps Elan would take fewer risks.

Elan nodded, and finally smiled. Minnow let out a whoop of excitement and sprinted around the garden. Elan hugged Tia, then Issa, and assured them she would cross-speak with them daily.

"Good, you will need to practice cross-speaking distances again. Much will be asked of you once the search has begun."

"I will tell you all our doings from the farthest reaches," Elan said, and watched Minnow hurry back and take several traveling baskets from their coral hooks beneath the overhang.

"Race you, Elan. We'll need food and healing herbs! Bet I can fill my basket before you—" and she sprinted away before Elan could reach another basket.

Elan joined her near the fruit trees and the grove of shark bane, and the two young Merra filled the garden with the sound of their excited laughter. They had little time before darkness, and they raced each other and the dimming light so their baskets would be full, and they could leave before dawn.

"It makes me heartsick, thinking of the dangers she will face," Tia said. Issa was silent, listening to the laughter that made Elan's approaching task look all the more cruel.

"It is all beyond us now," Issa said. "Groff and Kagor are threat enough, but we forget the storms."

"I do not forget the storms," Tia said, thinking of her newest project. Now that the garden was nearly complete, she had started most of the Merra in the Merra caves weaving storm anchors. Storm anchors were woven nets, smaller and flatter than sleepnets. The knots in

them were fine enough to keep out sand. Around the perimeter were cords, and at the end of each cord a hook. The hooks were attached all the way around a rock or coral mound, and once beneath it, the cords could be cinched until the webbed blanket was flattened against the rock. If the rock held, there was some chance of surviving the storm. Now that Elan was well, it would be the only part Tia could play in the difficult quest for the Seadragon. She was glad she could do something.

Elan and Minnow returned. They hung up their full baskets, breathing hard from their race. Their laughter fading, they got into their sleepnets. No one needed to tell them they would need all their rest before tomorrow, and Minnow, though she was excited about the trip, was still frightened. But she would be with Elan, her Between, and that honor made any risk in the open sea worthwhile.

Nemu was as anxious to leave as she was, and Elan heard the soft cross-speaking of her name from outside the garden. She slipped from her sleepnet and laid her hand on Minnow, who was already awake. They could tell from the darkness above them in the slit of moon window that dawn was still some time away, but they were ready to go.

All three of them were excited at the prospect of their expedition. Especially Elan, because she knew that soon after, they would embark on a search, the stakes of which were her Seadragon or the abyss. Elan knew that Nemu thrilled at the long swims, no matter what their reason. Since her injuries, he had had little to do but carry garden starters. He was ready for a more demanding task. He had been told by Tia and Issa to watch Elan not only for her safety but to determine her readiness for the more difficult quest.

As Elan and Minnow slipped out from between the sea fans for the first time, both were pressed by the same wall of threat Elan had felt so long ago after her first long stay in the sanctuary. Their enthusiasm was tinged with anxiety as they sensed the dangers around them. The menace had always been present, but was even stronger since the Seadragon's disappearance. Elan remembered her last trip to the Caverns and her muddled fears. Her

new strength already made a difference. She had a clearer knowledge of where threat lay.

Nemu's instinct was perfectly tuned, and all of it was turned to Elan's and Minnow's protection.

They swam northwest, and Elan awaited the light. Though the new power in her muscles had made her feel ready for anything, the ink-black water left her blind, and there was a chill on it she hadn't remembered.

"It is colder, isn't it?" Elan asked.

<And the nights, longer are,> Nemu said. Winter was still some time away, though the storms would make it difficult now to separate one season from the next. The shadow crept unhindered over the sea. The truest hearts, the shedragon and her mate, and the Squid, were gone. The schools of Nemu had all but disappeared.

Each of them carried supplies. Elan wore her knife and her luti. Nemu carried a larger bag with shark bane and food. A warning ran up Elan's spine as she looked at the dark silhouettes of Nemu and Minnow on either side. Minnow's natural ebullience was subdued, and Nemu was, as always, reserved.

<An eel hole, that was,> Nemu said, knowing Elan had sensed something.

"I hope it all comes back," Elan mused, "how to tell the direction of danger, and how great a menace. It has been so long." Straight ahead the blackness was breaking up into murky shapes. Dawn would arrive soon.

<Nemu a way found has, most easily danger to sense,> Nemu began. Both Elan and Minnow listened carefully. <It mistake is, for danger to look, danger itself shows, when nothing but silence within.>

"Like cross-speaking great distances?" Minnow asked.

<Yes,> Nemu answered, <but hardest is, silence to find.>

"How do you find silence, Nemu?" Elan wondered.

<Nemu not try silence to find; when all leaves, silence stays.> Elan and Minnow were quiet for some time as they swam. The gray shapes became rocks and ridges, and a faint rose tinged the new light.

"So if we can forget our fear and quests and memories, then we will find the silence we need?" Elan looked at Nemu, and she sensed his amusement. A rare pleasure.

<That, the only difficult part is.> There was laughter in his voice and Elan couldn't help but join him.

They swam at a steady pace until the sun was nearly

above them. The sky was clear blue, without hint of storm or darkness. Elan felt the sharpness returning; the lulling the garden brought was being shed. At this moment, all seemed so right that she almost believed their quest could succeed.

They passed through a section of very deep water. There were crevasses where the darkness below was too distant for the light to reach. An amber-colored grass grew sparsely over the ridges with sand beneath them. Far behind them were the hillocks and depressions of the same ridge of which the garden was a part, and beyond that, in the same line, the Caverns.

Ahead of them, there was still almost nothing. Periodically, the sun sent rays darting through the blue green of the water, but the expanse was bare of forests or rock. There were few living things to see. The vastness reminded Elan of the sky, an endless stretch of blue, but dense, and moving.

"It's awful," Minnow said, "a wasteland." She too had grown accustomed to the lushness of the garden and had forgotten how barren the open sea could look.

Elan tried several times to empty her mind of thoughts without success. Nemu had been right. The difficult part was quieting all the voices inside. She worried about Menol. How would he protect the Caverns from Groff if he was sending so many on the search for the Seadragon with her? Would the Merra gathering in the ruins be coming across the seas for nothing? What if she never heard the dragon? Where was he, and how close to the abyss did he venture? Would she be too late if she ever found him?

And what of Groff and Kagor? Did he hunt them even now? Elan's thoughts were cluttered, clouding her instincts the same way vision was lost when bottom muck was kicked up. She let the worries drift, and in their place finally came nothing but the rhythm of their movement.

Elan was amazed she felt so little fatigue. She was stronger than she had ever been, and it was Nemu who suggested they slow to eat. He had noticed the strain of the extended swim beginning to show around Minnow's mouth, held tightly with her effort to keep up.

They took provisions from their packs, and Nemu swam away a short distance to look for fish. Elan noticed he

was never far away, so he would have some difficulty finding much to eat. Around them now were a few more ridges and occasional clumps of seaweed. Nemu came back.

"Have most of the fish, like the Nemu, gone to look for safer waters, if there are any?" Elan looked at Nemu.

<Some gone are,> he said, <others hiding.> He looked down, as Elan did, at the ridges and increasing numbers of rocks.

"Because they know bad things will come," Minnow said with a sorrow that quieted them all.

They swam on again. Elan noticed that each time they entered a section where the ridges grew higher, Nemu would lead them up until they could see and sense in all directions.

At times the hair on Elan's neck stood up as they passed something sinister hidden in the dark crevices below. When Elan looked quietly at Minnow, not wishing to alarm her, she could see that Minnow sensed them too. Each time the two of them smiled weakly at each other, keeping their fears to themselves.

Darkness was approaching, and luckily the section they entered had a few shelters. A large green turtle swam by them, the first living thing they had seen for leagues. They looked about for the perfect place to hang their sleepnets. Here and there slabs of rock jutted up from the floor, enough to protect them from at least two directions of approach. Elan and Minnow set up their sleepnets around one such slab, and the webbing made walls, while the stone made roof and back. Nemu went on another hunt for scarce fish, and when he returned Elan talked him into resting a short time.

While Minnow slept and Elan guarded, Nemu rested. Still, each nerve in his sensitive skin was alive to any disturbance in the distance.

Elan tried to turn her thoughts to stillness. Now was the time she would have heard the Seadragon, if he were still calling to her. But he would not, she knew, and inside her lingered that empty place. The songs that had always been just behind her breath, ready to be sung out, remained buried beneath some unnameable weight. It tore at her; though she could make her body well, there was little she could alter about the emptiness of her heart.

Elan felt Nemu stir. He had rested long enough. Without speaking, he began swimming soundlessly around their enclosure to guard their safety the rest of the night. Elan felt fatigue creep through her, and she wished she were less conscious of the void where her voices had been. Out here, away from the garden, she was even more aware of the loss.

The night passed quickly, and at the first light they were on their way again. They had become accustomed to the constant movement, and the second day passed like the first, without incident. Elan felt her abilities return, so most of the day she allowed her worries to drift, imagined them like ripples from a fallen stone—traveling outward from the center until they disappeared. On the still pool played the faintest whispers. She felt distant dangers, and at one point she thought she heard Menol cross-speaking. He was very far away, though, so it was more likely that he had only been thinking of her.

Nemu had his own thoughts, waiting to see if Elan would regain the instincts she needed to survive. As the days passed, he watched her eyes and saw the softness in them give way to a spark. Her whole body developed a grace of readiness.

That night they found a cave with a narrow entrance, just wide enough for Nemu to pass. While Minnow and Elan let sleep take them, Nemu only rested, with the delicate skin of his side pressed against the opening, picking up signals on the current like scents.

On the third day of their journey they turned east to start back again. Elan was as ready as she could be for the harsher quest, and too anxious not to be at it. The edge of the plateau they traveled over caught the light of shallower waters, then dropped off abruptly. It bordered another section of deep water, and the indigo shadows reached upward and created a dark wall all along the edge of the plateau that ran southeast. They decided to follow the precipice south, and eventually they would cut back to the southwest again to find the garden. Nemu wanted to go back. He distrusted something, perhaps this long a period without incident. Elan agreed, making a point of cross-speaking with Tia and Issa to tell them of their intention to return. That would calm their fears. There had been moments when she was so lost in the stillness, she had no thoughts. She had been aware of

their cross-spoken messages to her. They told her to take care and that they had heard her.

Minnow and even Nemu would have been satisfied to travel over the plateau, but it was Elan who wanted to venture closer to the deep water. If they could distinguish dangers among the many that floated up from the depths, they would be ready for anything. The Nemu agreed, as did Minnow, but Elan noticed that Minnow paled even as she encouraged the Merra Between. The plateau edge was far away, and they turned toward it.

There were more clouds today, yet still no threat of storm. But they knew too well that any clouds could bring the darkness. As they swam in the direction of the deep water, Elan watched the sea grow dark and light again with the passing of the clouds over the sun.

They had barely covered half the distance to the ridge when Elan felt a chilling premonition. Was it something remembered or some present danger? The Between looked at Nemu and saw a wild flash of fear come into his eyes. Minnow looked behind them out of instinct, as did both the others. Elan had felt this before, once on a moonlit night, and again the grisly day at the Center Place. They said nothing, nor could they see anything in the broadest reaches of emptiness around them, but it was certain that something malevolent knew of them, and followed.

<Hunter,> Nemu cross-spoke at last. He was too familiar with the chill, and escaping them more than once was asking much. <Our scents, his sharks have found.> He turned a warning eye to Elan, who knew what being caught in this unprotected expanse would mean. There were no rock formations large enough for them to hide in, and in any direction they would have to fly for days to be free of their assassins. Elan looked ahead toward the blackness of the abyss of deep water. Though it held equal threat, when she turned to Nemu, Elan knew he held the same thought.

<No other place,> Nemu said. Elan turned to Minnow, who still searched for the thing that made her skin crawl.

"Minnow, you know what hunters are, but you have never felt one until now." Elan could not be certain it was Kagor, and she did not want to think his name. Minnow shook her head and allowed the fear to show in her eyes. "His sharks will kill us unless we can get away," Elan went on, consumed by the urgency to flee. Minnow

looked ahead at the threatening deep water, then back at Elan. She nodded, trusting her Between. "We must, our scents may be lost on the currents there," Elan said. Nemu looked up to the sky above the sea's surface. The clouds grew blacker and there was a chill on the water beyond what the hunter and his sharks brought.

<A storm,> Nemu said, with dread and hope.

"If we make it to the deep water before it hits, we may have a chance." Elan tied her basket closer to her as they swam, then reached for Minnow's to let it drop.

<If we this hunter lose, then about storm killing can worry,> Nemu said. Elan knew he was right. The double threat crept closer. Now they would begin a sprint that would split their lungs, for they had no more time.

Elan laid her hand on Minnow's shoulder a moment as they began to swim faster.

"Are you ready, Minnow? You must use all the strength you can find. We have to go faster than you've ever gone, and longer—we cannot stop until we find the black depths around us," Elan warned. Minnow nodded, her eyes wide.

<We fly!> Nemu shouted, and the three of them felt the surge of energy explode in them simultaneously as they began the race for their lives.

Elan's mind screamed "kick kick kick!" as she imagined herself a spear slicing through the water. Minnow's youth and fear would sustain her, but Elan worried.

There was no measure of time or distance in this flight. Moments or half a day it could have been. They raced for the darkness without looking back, the hot ache flaring in Elan's muscles. The water they rushed through pressed against her face, and she felt the nearness of Minnow and Nemu, the frantic pumping of their tails matching stroke for stroke. Elan wondered how long Minnow would be able to keep up this speed, knowing the young Merra would rather die than admit her exhaustion.

As they neared the darkness of the deep water, Elan could feel the storm approaching, and the ever more ominous presence of the hunter behind them. Had his sharks sensed their frantic race and taken up the chase with equal or superior speed? Elan pressed her arms even closer to her sides and forced her numb muscles to go on. As the edge of the ridge and the deep-water precipice loomed ahead, the smell of violence breathed

out and enveloped them. Elan saw that Minnow was slowing and looked to see the pain contorting her face.

<Minnow, ride Nemu!> Elan's cross-speak command was unmistakable. Slowing only slightly, Nemu crossed beneath her. Minnow grasped his dorsal and continued pumping her tail. Elan looked back for an instant and saw for the first time their pursuers following at great speed. Death chased them, the hunter and his sharks. Elan suppressed a scream.

"Fly, Nemu, fly!" Elan yelled, and from the depths of their waning strength, Elan and the Nemu raced for the plateau edge. The water grew icy cold, and all Elan could wonder was how the hunter had followed so fast. The shadow of the depths cast upward just ahead; suddenly they entered it and looked down into the evil place. They were buffeted by the first violent surge in the current. The storm was upon them, and where in this hellish deep would they find shelter from all that closed in on them? Elan glanced once at Nemu, at his determined strain and Minnow on his back, white with fear, her hair streaming back. At the same moment they shot straight down and swam with the same intensity into the unforgiving mouth of the depths.

It grew darker and colder, and as the light drew back, the pressure increased and cut in half the remaining reserves of strength. Elan felt the threat beating her as the last of her will was swallowed by a rush of pain and weariness. Suddenly when measured as loss, her longing to find the Seadragon seemed not so impossible. It was everything, and would be lost with her because she had to stop. She couldn't move or swim any farther. Currents began to sweep them one way, then another, and Elan was afraid her muscles would lock in a knot of fatigue, and she would lose Nemu and Minnow in the growing violence of the storm.

"There!" Minnow screamed, pointing. Instead of pressing her face to Nemu's side to keep out her fears she had hunted in the darkness for some place to hide. "Can you see it?" Minnow continued to scream. Elan could barely turn her head to see where the maid pointed. The pressure of the depth began to crush her lungs, and she pulled her whipping hair away.

At last she saw what Minnow had spotted. Nemu led the way. It was a huge split-tail ship still far below them.

Its metal hull was intact, and in this icy water had grown little crust. It had sunk some time ago, and wedged in a crevice before it made the rest of the journey to the bottom of the abyss. The current pressed against them fiercely as the storm's menace grew. Elan was far beyond her strength, and though she swam as hard as she could against the currents, she came no closer to the wreck. Nemu pushed her forward once, then again, and with the image of the hunter yawning over her, Elan made one last lunge toward the ghost ship and shelter.

They reached the ship, but had trouble staying together as they swam the length of the giant metal hull looking for a way in. The current now raged so fiercely Elan had to hold on to the ship not to be swept away. Her hair whipped and stung her back. As they fought toward the bow, Elan spotted an open hatch. She cross-spoke and saw the vague shape of Nemu and Minnow clinging to him with both arms around. Elan held on to the hatch to keep from being pulled into the blackness beyond, and followed Nemu and Minnow inside.

The hatch would not close but the hull kept out most of the buffeting, and the farther down into the hold they dropped, the stiller the water became. In their mouths the water brought an odd metal taste, and a nameless other taste carried long ago to some split-tail port in this hold. Outside they could feel the trembling of the thick hull as the ship weathered another storm. It would save their lives, as outside the whipping currents erased all trace of them and made it impossible for the hunter and his sharks to reach them. Other creatures had found this sanctuary. Five or six glowfish swam in the corners, eerily lighting them all. They could hear the ferocity of the storm build, and in it they knew lay their safety. For not even hunters were safe from storms.

Nemu looked above them and saw a pocket of air. Winters before, when this ship had overturned and plunged to its doom, it had trapped a massive store of air, still captive within the watertight hull. Elan watched Nemu swim up to breathe it. She knew it would be foul, but better than the storm. The Nemu returned, nodding.

<A good ship.> He swam up to the hatch to taste the current for the hunter's nearness. Nemu nodded again, satisfied.

<Do you feel him?> Elan asked.

<Not gone, but far,> Nemu answered. Minnow, as tired as she was, did a backward loop, and then another, and whooped loud enough to startle the glowfish.

Elan felt a new lightness, even in this tomblike hold. She knew now they would live, when she had been so certain they would die. She shared Minnow and Nemu's joy. Their quest would not be over before it had begun. They would look for the Seadragon, and there was some chance, a small one, that they might find him. Elan suddenly felt different. What was it? She was aware that this new belief had made a change within her, but she wasn't certain what it was. While she waited to name it, she listened to the storm and hummed, then cried out, startled, "The songs!"

"What is it, Elan?" Minnow asked, knowing it was something joyous.

"My voice! Minnow, Nemu!" Elan pressed her hands over her face, crying, then her breast, for beneath was where the songs now rested. "Oh! Oh!" was all she could say. All the Merra songs were back, filling up the void that had crippled her. She was no longer mute. When Minnow understood, she hugged Elan, and they both hugged Nemu. With the storm raging outside and the bitter blackness surrounding them, Elan sang a calming song in her cross-speak mind. She sang it for Minnow and Nemu, for Menol and Issa and Tia, and for the Seadragon. She sang to give them courage to face all the coming storms. And she sang it because some small part of her torment had lifted, and it was her way to thank the Balance.

Around the blue, the seabirds fly,
Whispering, whispering waves.
Beneath the sea, the Nemu sigh,
Whispering, whispering waves.
Sunbeams caught in glistening foam,
Whispering, whispering waves.
These voices call the Merra home.
Whispering, whispering waves.

Another part of the threat lifted, and Elan knew at that moment the hunter had been swept away by the current. They were safe, at least for now. But this was not the only gift swept in by the storm.

In the creaking of the ghost ship, in the howling of the currents through its portholes, a different song came back. It was as soft as the whisper in a seashell. When Elan put her hands to her head, Minnow and Nemu swam close to look at her, for her eyes had grown large, and light seemed to come from her skin. She drifted into a partial trance as she listened.

The calling came again above the roar of the storm, and then again once more. Somewhere far away, Elan's song of courage had entered a dream like a lost memory. Out of habit he had answered. It was the Seadragon, calling to his Between.

When this storm was over, and even after many winters had passed, the hold of this ghost ship would still taste of the tears of the Merra Between.

24

Farewells



Reena looked up through the gray-blue sea at the gathering storm clouds. She pulled a heavy float sled of stolen sea vegetable with two other maids.

Since she had arrived in Groff's hidden city, Reena had been among the maids who raided the newly planted groves outside the Caverns. She had managed to leave Jegga nearly the moment they had arrived, and had had to make up a story of losing her guard mate to shark attack to be accepted by the maids.

Reena had few occasions to be in Groff's city, which was well, for it was a violent place. She was either out with the other maids or hidden away in some protected cranny at night. Though her sleepnet and blade were small protection against the dangers of the open sea, she would rather take her chances with predators than with grog-sodden guards.

Sensing the darkening sky, Reena knew they would be lucky to get back to Groff's city before they lost the float sleds and the vegetable. Instead of being worried, she felt elation, as storms—and there had been few in the last moon—created confusion.

She and the other maids had just completed another successful raid. Reena had to remind herself she would not have to be among them much longer. Her greatest pride was that on one of their raids, she had managed to slip away from the others and go to her sister Luana with the location of Groff's hidden city. She had drawn a map of the ridges and features that surrounded it. She had no time to do anything more. She knew her sister would get the message to Menol, and when her sister begged her

not to go back, Reena had only said there was one more piece of information she could discover.

When a storm hit Groff's Caverns, Mogs rushed everywhere, trying to secure their belongings against the currents. Everyone would be too busy to notice her. It would be the moment for which she had come back to the caves.

Shortly after she had arrived in the city, she had heard guards talking one night of the weapons cache, and she knew if she could find it, and somehow get word to Menol, he could have some advantage once his fight with Groff began. She had not had a chance to look through the caves; there were many guards there, and hunters. Groff and his special guards had much business in the area Reena suspected concealed the cache. But if this storm was as violent as she thought it would be, they would pay little attention to one "lost" maid.

By the time they reached the city, the currents whipped against them. Reena went with the others to several of the deepest holds to secure the food in holding nets against the cave walls. She slipped away as the confusion was building. If she were lucky, she would find the cache before the storm got too fierce, and hide in a small cave she knew outside the walls.

Reena traveled through long, darkening passages. The currents were already whipping sand that stung her, and those who still had property unprotected rushed about looking for help.

Her heart pounded as she entered the first chamber. She had no idea how far back it led or how many rooms branched off of it. For all she knew, she could be entering the hunters' quarters, or Groff's. Mogs swam by her, but none questioned her. It was soon apparent that the room was of little interest to her. It held great clusters of nets and sleepnetting that needed mending. They were drifting around the cave on the currents, and others danced wildly from their hooks on the walls. She left for the next passage.

The next series of chambers looked more promising. As she entered, she could hear a dry-air chamber above them. The weapon makers were hurriedly gathering long-woody reeds that had been drying above. When treated, the shaft was used for spear making. When Reena saw

these, she knew she must be getting closer. Several Mogs were struggling to tie down the shafts.

"Hey! Maid—come and make yourself useful," one yelled, but Reena shot away, knowing he was more interested in his half-finished weapons than he was in catching her.

Reena was about to leave this chamber and swim toward the next when she heard someone yell, "Maid, you! What are you doing here?" She stayed hidden, hoping no one would come. She waited until she could no longer hear him, then quickly entered the next section of caverns.

It was a wider passage. At the end of it she saw much activity among the Mog guards. She had a rush of fear. This must be it, she thought, and stayed close to the wall as she swam back. Suddenly someone rushed at her from behind.

"What are you doing in here, maid?" A guard gripped her arm roughly. Reena tried to smile and to look frightened. She put her hands to her eyes. "This is a forbidden area—explain yourself."

"I—I was trying to get back to my cave, but I was blinded a moment by sand—and, uh, I had not intended to come here, but I—I think I heard some of those you captured from the other hold—"

"What did you hear? Get to it!" He shook her.

"I thought I heard them say they were going to try to steal weapons."

"An attack, you say?" he yelled, and rushed to the other end of the passageway, leaving her without a thought. If he entered the last chamber with his weapon drawn, she would know where he expected the battle. She did not have to wait long, for he did as she expected. She was about to leave when she felt a shiver and turned. Behind her, Groff, with three of the most cruel-looking guards she had ever seen, stared at her and at the sudden commotion she had caused.

"What is this I hear about an attack?" Groff's voice was quiet with threat, and he smiled. The guards did not.

"A mistake, I think, your grace." Reena lowered her gaze and tried to swim away. The nearest guard tipped his spear and rested the point of it at her breast.

"Yes, certainly a mistake," he said, and nodded to the guards to take her.

After Elan, Nemu, and Minnow had waited out the storm and returned from their journey, Tia and Issa met them at the entrance to the garden. The violence of the storm had visited itself upon their sanctuary, and though Elan had cross-spoken of their well-being, the two older Merra feared for the lives of their wards.

The three travelers were tired, having rested little on their return swim to the garden. There had been no more storms, nor any further sign of the hunter.

When they arrived, Elan had wondered whether Nemu would mention the hunter or their near escape. She and Minnow were ready to keep this fearful truth to themselves. Nemu too thought better than to give the older Merras greater reason to grieve. They told them briefly of their other adventures, and most importantly, about hearing the Seadragon.

Tia and Issa were thrilled, and once they were convinced the three had truly escaped the storm uninjured, their main concern became Elan. Was she prepared for the quest?

"The Between is ready?" Issa asked Nemu.

Nemu smiled with a special look for Elan and said, <Between ready is.>

Elan knew from Issa's expression that she was satisfied. Tia gave Nemu a farewell hug, as did Elan and Minnow, then the Merra went back up the passage into the garden.

Once inside, Elan let her mind move often to the storm and threat of the hunter. She wanted no lulling to quiet the edge she felt. She was ready and felt the urgency of her need to find the Seadragon swell within her. Elan hoped to leave immediately, but Issa told her the four lead Merra searchers were coming from the ruins that night to the garden. Their visit, and countless other details, would fill the time until the moment of departure.

Later, with darkness to cover them, Nemu led the visitors to the garden. They were not followed. Once inside, Elan was anxious to tell them she had heard the dragon, and to begin discussing their plans. But she waited patiently, watching the separate emotions play over each Merra's face after they saw their verdant legacy before them. Though they could have explored the treasure hold for days, they knew they had to satisfy themselves with a brief look. Another time they could allow them-

selves the luxury of understanding the profound significance of this garden. This moment was for other tasks.

She met Wim and Adri, Arak and Hollan. They were leaders among the searchers. Elan was impressed by them, and felt more certain that their quest was possible. They exuded a serene strength, and she was glad she would be able to recall their faces as their voices found her from the vast realm of the sea.

After their introductions were over, Elan could keep her news no longer. When she told them she had heard the Seadragon's call, there was an outcry from them all. There was little that could have pleased them more. They wanted to know each detail. They were most concerned with her location when she had heard him. Since she had been near the northwest plateau, her sense told her that would be a good direction to begin. The others agreed. They had many questions, which Elan answered as best she could.

When they were satisfied there was nothing else to learn of the contact, they at last went over the final details of the search, reporting on the progress being made on the storm anchors. There was now one for each guard who would accompany Elan, and one for each of the searchers. The guards and searchers would add the anchor to the distance food and shark bane they already planned to carry with them.

Elan felt great joy to see what pride the first vision of the garden brought to the Merra. She wished all the Merra could have seen it before they faced the dangers awaiting them in the open sea, for the serenity and magnificence of their past was a comfort to take with them as formidable as any weapon against the dark.

Because there was still much to prepare, the searchers had to depart for the Caverns. This they did reluctantly. There was a stillness again in the garden.

Elan was kept so busy she had little time to think of Menol. She knew he too was busy. Among his countless other duties, he had had to choose the best guards to protect her. She had heard that so many guards had wanted to accompany her that there had been a competition. Nemu had been there to witness the games, and it was, he said, the first merriment the Center Place had seen for moons. Though each Merra and Mog reveled in

the chance to show his skills, no one forgot the purpose of the competition, and all took the task seriously.

Menol's greatest difficulty was keeping the time and place of their departure a secret. There had been no success in discovering the hunters who would pursue Elan, though Menol had had the best of his own hunters, Merra well trained in the open sea, to stalk them. Their task would be dangerous enough without Groff or Kagor to contend with. A departure free of attack was what they hoped for, and a half-day start could do much for losing their trail on the currents.

Elan had another difficult task. She had discussed with Issa whether or not Minnow would become one of the searchers. The young Merra's calling was to have been that of healer. Her duty was to assist Issa and to learn all of the secrets of the healing arts that Issa had gathered over her long life. Though Issa knew the search could take winters, and that it would interrupt Minnow's training, she left it up to Elan to decide. After long thought, Elan had gone to Minnow first to tell her. Minnow was subdued.

"You have already proven your bravery, Minnow, and your value to me is beyond measure. I could not have gotten well without your love, and it is because of this gift you have that I will ask you to stay here in the garden."

Minnow, who had been hoping to go, cast down her eyes. She could never be angry with Elan. "There is much I can do here," she said, trying to keep the crying in her throat from pinching her voice.

"If we find the dragon, he will need much care. It is you I will be depending on to cross the sea with what we will need." Elan tried to look into Minnow's downcast eyes.

"I will be proud to come, Between, and you will find him."

Elan smiled, and took Minnow in her arms. "I hope you will understand if it sounds more selfish than fair, but you are so dear to me that if you were alone in the open sea, I am afraid my thoughts would turn too often to your safety, and there would be less of me to listen for the dragon. That would make it more difficult, and that also is why you must stay." Minnow nodded and cried. Elan cried too. She knew how difficult it must be to be

left behind. And because the two maids had been together so long, and had faced dangers together, they were inseparable until the moment Elan had to leave the garden.

The moonless night arrived. Minnow hugged her friend the Between, and held tightly to Tooki so he would not try to follow. Now that the moment had come, having no idea how many winters she would be gone, or if she would see them again, Elan felt her urgency to begin the search being eclipsed by her love for them—Tia and Issa and Minnow. She looked around the garden, then back into the faces of her friends, one by one. Each said her good-byes bravely, and with a lingering glance at them, Elan left. She could feel their thoughts enveloping her until the moment she passed through the sea fans and swam next to Nemu.

<A good night for difficult journeys,> Nemu said quietly. They swam side by side to a secret destination arranged by the Merra searchers.

Elan loved him, and felt fulfilled at his nearness. <Yes, a good night, Nemu,> she said, looking into his kind eyes. They swam toward a small grotto north of the Caverns. Their meeting would take place in the cover of darkness; their departure, just before dawn.

As they drew near the rendezvous, Elan was surprised and thrilled to hear Menol's voice in cross-speak. She had thought she'd heard it once on the journey, but had discounted the possibility. But this was clear and strong. He was still some distance away. She had not spoken with him directly since their meeting in the Merra room.

<Your guards await you, Between,> he said. In his voice was all that he left unsaid, that it should be he who was going to protect her. Since he could not, he knew that there were no finer Mogs or Merra than those he had chosen.

Elan felt a rush of warmth as his voice rumbled within her. The last corner of her heart lying dormant shuddered to life. The stirrings. <We come,> she answered. She looked at Nemu, barely visible in the water next to her. <You are a very fine teacher, Nemu,> she said. He nodded with silent laughter. He had not expected her to guess.

They swam on. Elan felt the bond of her love for Nemu grow stronger in the shadow of the immense task

they faced. She wondered if she could have done this alone. She had, before this night had come, once again offered Nemu his chance to be free. But he had answered that he would be free when she was, and that would be when they found the Seadragon.

As the distance to the grotto passed, Elan grew more accustomed to the blackness around them. This night had been chosen for the darkness of the new moon, and the starlight that made vague shapes of the seascape was not enough to reveal their secret leaving.

No living being was visible in the grotto until Elan and Nemu swam into its depths. Here the rest of the party waited, and Elan and Nemu felt the force of their welcome.

Elan had not seen Menol or the others since the day she had met them in the Caverns. Menol took her hand, and she pressed it. They saw each other in the light of one caged glowfish.

"All are ready for you, Elan," Menol said. Elan saw the rest of them now, the Merra Elders and the head Merra searchers. They stared at her. The Elders' reservations gave way to disbelief and finally to reverence as they recognized the urgency in her to begin this quest. She was so changed that any doubt they might have had vanished.

"Between," the Merras said, and bowed their heads slightly. Menol drifted closer to her, relief and amazement in his face. Elan smiled, but while one part of her gloried in his touch, another mourned. There was no time for love, and their own pleasures would play no part in their lives to come. She was completely consumed by the task ahead, and until it was concluded, Menol could not be hers the way he had been before. She would either find the dragon and long for the day when Menol held her again, or she would find her death and have whatever memories one took to the abyss.

"We have had news that changes the plan slightly," Menol said.

"What is it?" Elan asked.

"We have learned of Groff's location, and we also suspect that one among the Elders is still with Groff." Menol looked from her to the others.

Elan glanced at him, now understanding why just the Merra Elders accompanied him.

"We also know all of Groff's hunters are preparing to

follow you and the searchers," Arika added. "He has sent out word of rewards to the farthest holds, and many hunters have come."

"Our own will meet them," Menol warned.

"What of Kagor?" Elan asked.

"We could find nothing of him," Menol answered.

"How have you learned these things?" Elan asked. They all looked to Menol.

"Just yesterday we captured a hunter, and from him we learned that the hunters gather," Menol said, then grew grim. "The rest we learned from my sister, Reena." Menol said no more.

"She has gone among them?" Elan asked, her eyes wide.

"Yes," Will said, subdued.

"She is safely back with you?" Elan felt Menol's sorrow and knew the answer.

"We have had no word since she saw Luana," Menol said.

"Because of her courage, we know where Groff hides, and know he has a traitor among us. If we keep this secret, good use can be made of information dearly won," Muni said.

"The plan changes only in that you will not wait for the dawn, but leave immediately," Will said. "All is in readiness."

Menol motioned to someone at the edge of the grotto who had been alertly waiting, though too distant to see in the gloom.

He was a Mog, very powerful looking, wearing the weapon of the special guard. Elan thought she remembered him. The guard looked at Menol first, then at her. She was struck at once by the devotion she sensed in him. His glance held the same steadiness as Nemu's, and Elan felt as if he knew her somehow.

"This is Dehtu. He will be your protector, and is the head of the guards who have been chosen to accompany you," Menol said. Elan smiled at him, and at Menol. She bowed her head slightly to the Mog.

"I am honored, Merra Between, to be in your service." Dehtu made her the sign of respect, which she returned. Dehtu's devotion to her was as deep as his life, and it had been born, as it was in all of the other guards, the day Elan had faced the Seadragon. Dehtu had been

close to his own death many times and knew himself courageous, but that day he had felt real fear, and what he had seen Elan do still quaked his heart. He was proud to follow a maid such as this.

"Seeing what horror I saw you face, Between, I would never have believed you would have lived to take this journey." Dehtu's tone expressed his wonder.

"And you must believe me when I tell you, Dehtu, that I live because of this journey," Elan said to him, and to all the others in the grotto.

"We must not lose what advantage we have," Menol said. "Groff suspects you will leave at dawn tomorrow. We gave out conflicting reports to the other Elders."

"For the first five days away we can use shark bane to mask our trail. We will give him a good race," Dehtu said.

"Merra hunters have been alerted and will crisscross your path and the direction you travel. Any hunters they meet will not live to pursue you," Will added.

"The Balance bless and keep you," Arika said.

"Farewell, Between," Ollon said, "and brave Nemu and Merra."

Elan turned to all of them, and lastly to Menol, whose face would not tell of his ordeal at this moment. He kept his eyes steadily on her as she took both his hands and touched her cheek to his. The searchers spoke among themselves and with Dehtu. Elan and Menol moved away from the others to steal a moment. Menol reached into a woven bag he carried and handed her a parcel.

<I had this made for you,> he said. Elan touched his face. How much he wanted to be with her. She felt him waiting, and opened the wrapped leaves. What she found was a woven breastplate of silver wire and blue mother-of-pearl. Part of it was split-tail treasure, Elan was sure, for wire had to be found. The shell, delicate small disks closely connected, was armor that could slow any blade or shark's jaw and make her nearly invisible. There were arm guards as well. Menol helped her put it on.

<Oh, Menol—I will have you with me,> she whispered. After it was fastened, covering her neck to waist, Elan drifted close to him, and felt the strength of his arms around her, and the softness of his cheek.

<It will protect you, as I have longed to do since we met,> he said. They were silent a moment.

<Your battle with Groff?> she asked.

<Very soon—we give his traitor false reports.>

Elan looked into his face and kissed him softly on the mouth. <I love you with all my heart.>

<And I, you,> he said. <All will be well when I see you return.> She pulled back from him, then Menol led her to the others.

<Good-bye, Nemu. Go safely, and with speed,> Menol said.

Nemu nodded. <Courage here, High Elder.>

"The Balance keep you," many said as farewells were made. As the Elders and Menol watched, Elan, Nemu, and the head searchers swam away from the grotto. Dehtu and his fifty Merra and Mog guards surrounded them. Because the dawn was yet half the night away, they were soon swallowed up by the darkness. But Menol watched for some time and thought he could see the starlight reflect in Elan's eyes as she turned back to look for him one last time.

25

Endless Journey



Elan peered around her in the darkness and saw the vague shapes of the guards. The head searchers would swim with them until each reached the point where he or she would branch away to lead the other Merra searchers. Elan cross-spoke with them to let them know they too should listen for the Seadragon. Each searcher traveled a half day's swim from the next, and the cross-spoken voices would be relayed until they reached Elan.

They swam on in silence. Elan wondered if it was the closeness of the others, or if there was less of a deathly chill upon the water. Because she felt the force of so many wills turned to one purpose, she suddenly noticed a contrasting desire within herself. Had it always been there, or just appeared? She had to drift back from her awareness of Nemu's nearness and the sounds of the guards' weapons clicking against their armor. Finally she knew what this dark seed was in her. It frightened her, that despite all that had changed, this debility remained.

Out in the open sea, the object of their search, the Seadragon, still wrestled with death. In him was no desire to be in this world, and no matter how Elan fought against it, a part of her was bound inseparably to the dragon. Was he somehow closer to the abyss? She felt the death pull, but at the same moment, there was something else. Could it be she heard other voices? The combined and profound desire of all the Merra, calling the dragon back?

She could find little comfort in her vision of the Seadragon, hovering over some abyss, and her own ambivalence about following him there was still shocking to her. Was it poison that had entered her from the darken-

ing Balance around them? Why did the thought of the abyss bring her peace instead of repulsion? Nemu brushed against her and brought Elan gratefully from her confusing thoughts.

She thought of Menol and felt the beautiful armor against her. The moment she put it on, the cold shell became as warm as her skin. There was something magical about it, as if Menol's love were woven in, and would protect her. She felt quite the warrior in it. Around her waist were her blade and luti.

Elan laid her hand over the shell, as she often did, and wondered to what seas the Nemu had gone, and when, if ever, they would return. Would they have helped her with this quest? She could not call them on a journey that could take winters. She would not ask them to face the killing storms. She hoped only that they had found quiet lagoons, away from the growing menace.

They swam the night without slowing and without speaking. At intervals, Elan crushed the bane that would cover the scent of their trail.

As dawn arrived, she had the chance to look at the guards around her in light. How fine they were, and how proud they all looked. She did not know that many more had asked to accompany her, even on so dangerous a journey. None had to be told of the peril of their duty, and each had only one desire. They would protect the Between or die. Her quest was their own. Perhaps it was this Elan sensed in them, and why this first morning of their journey, as impossible as their task seemed, and with her own death secret riding in her belly, she still felt the warmth of the sun and thought the sea gloriously blue.

Groff was glad to feel no diminishing in his protection as he watched the fifteen hunters leave. In truth, their sharks made him nervous, and he never liked talking to hunters for that reason. The incessant movement of the vacant-eyed beasts upset him, made his stomach boil.

He still had his special guard. Beasts they were themselves, some could tear the head from an attacking shark or Mog. Groff looked at them around him. Their muscles rippled, and their armor shone with mother-of-pearl. In their faces, no thought could be read but devotion. Groff marveled. Fear did not motivate these Mogs—greed per-

haps. But there was some other phenomenon he had no time to ponder. It was as if loyalty was a disease. Each checked it in the other, and because of it, Groff had an impenetrable wall around him.

He had to admit that fifteen hunters was a meager force to search the sea for scent of Merra Between or Seadragon. They had two advantages, however: one, the sharks could sense movement from vast distances; and two, there had been vague reports that the Merra would leave soon. Because of that, Groff had more patrols out, and one had reported seeing a large party heading north. That had to be it; though north was hardly specific, it narrowed down the problem.

Kagor had not returned, and Groff's anger rose as he thought of it. But Kagor was more of a shark than his beasts, and in the long time he had been gone, Groff believed Kagor had found some trace of the dragon. Perhaps he was only waiting for the Between to come to him.

Whatever the case, Groff's plan was in motion. The Merra was off, his hunters would find her. Tuan had informed him that Menol had had a cavern collapse and destroy much of the weaponry he had been making for battle. Groff smiled. His saboteurs had been doing their jobs well. That would give him a few more days to train the captives, who showed more eagerness than skill where fighting was concerned. He already had the advantage in numbers of guards, and Menol's days as High Elder were closing fast. Groff motioned to his special guard to follow him back to his chamber. Everything was going his way.

Calen led his patrol through the black night. There had been an increase in skirmishes between the guards of the Caverns and Groff's Mogs. The Merra and Mog guards in Calen's group were alert to any sound or disturbance beyond the third reef where they circled the night through.

Though the Mogs were still the superior fighters, many of the Merra, especially those who had experience shark hunting, were becoming equal matches. There was little rivalry between the guards, and what the Merra lacked in strategy, they more than made up for in instinct and intelligence. The Merra guards sensed danger and kept their heads in combat, and the more seasoned Mog guards found much to emulate in their new companions.

Calen and the other special guards were the only ones who knew that the Merra Between had left on her journey to find the Seadragon. She, and the guards who accompanied her, had left nearly a half-moon before. Calen had wanted to go, but he was deemed too young and inexperienced. He had done well in the competition, well enough to be given the status of special guard. He had been patrol head for some time and tonight was a test of his control. He was one of the few who knew dawn would bring with it the moment all had been preparing for in the Caverns. The attack on Groff's city. Menol had gotten word that Groff and his guards were preparing to advance. Groff had built his forces considerably in the time since he left the Caverns, and Menol knew that to wait for an attack would mean destruction of the Caverns.

Very few knew this secret. Menol had been careful to tell only those who had to know. Tuan, Groff's spy among them, had been given ample time to sneak a false message to Groff. A message designed to keep Groff from suspecting the suddenness with which Menol and the Caverns would act.

Calen did not push the guards too hard, knowing they would have little rest in the next five days. They would have their patrol this night, then the passage to where Groff prepared his attack. Groff, whose location had been so long a mystery.

Neither Calen nor anyone outside the Merra Elders and Menol knew how this information had been obtained, and he thought little of it. What he did think about was the fight to come. He felt some fear at what the battle would bring. There had been skirmishes his patrol had encountered, where one drew a blade against a dark shape in the night. It would be much different, face-to-face, in the close combat Calen knew would be raging in Groff's city.

With two of his Merra guard, Calen raised hands to stop the others soundlessly. They had sensed someone coming, someone alone. This was unusual, and Calen advanced, his weapon ready, motioning the others to wait.

There was enough moon to see by, so Calen swam near the bottom to have the advantage as the stranger advanced. Whoever was sneaking into the Caverns would

be silhouetted against the moonlight, while Calen was lost in the shadows below. He hardly breathed as the figure approached. Whoever it was slowed, perhaps sensing danger. As the current moved, Calen saw that the attacker was a maid, and by the way she was swimming, hunched and clutching an arm close, she looked wounded.

"Halt there, maid, or you will feel my blade and others." Calen rose before her. The moonlight revealed that she was beautiful, and barely conscious. He had to strain to hear her.

"You are a cavern guard?" she asked.

"Yes, state your business." There was no need to threaten her, for she was pale and weakened.

"I am Menol's—the High Elder's—sister. You must take me to him." And the maid faltered, doubling over with pain. "You must take me to him at once."

Calen knew that Menol had sisters. He had even heard rumors that one had turned traitor and gone to Groff. Was this the one? It was not his place to judge, Calen thought. Traitor or no, she had just come a long way alone, wounded. A bone protruded from her crushed arm. She tried to hold it to her, but there were many breaks and he guessed she had lost much blood.

"We will go," he said to her, giving the patrol to his next in command. When he put his arm around her to lead her to Menol, he found that she burned with fever. The wound was old, and the poison had entered it. He knew she would be dead soon, and he sensed that she was no traitor. He had to hurry.

Arika, in full battle gear, and Ollon would accompany Menol and the three hundred guards to Groff's city. The head guards conferred in the chamber with them, and all were startled by a commotion at the entrance.

Menol held back a cry as Reena was led into the cave. She was no longer swimming by her own power, and only remained conscious by force of will.

He went into a private chamber with her. Since she clung to Calen, Menol motioned for him to stay. Arika followed, full of concern for the maid and Menol.

"You must let us take her while there is still some hope to keep her with us—to the healer who tended to Elan—"

"Wait—" Reena whispered, and with great effort she

described the passages that led to the weapons. It tore at Menol to let her go on talking, but he knew she would die if she thought her effort had been for nothing. When she at last finished, he kissed her, and she lost consciousness.

"Where is your healer?"

Arika quickly cross-spoke with Will and Muni. Neither was traveling with Menol but would stay behind to protect the Caverns. Calen, looking shaken by her courage and nearness to death, let Reena go into Will's arms. Arika removed a daborah leaf from her travel sack and slipped it between the maid's lips. With Menol's help, she peeled several leaves of c'tor. They placed them over the open wounds of Reena's crushed arm.

Without waiting, Will and Muni left. Arika looked into Menol's anguished face. He wanted to be with his sister, but once again, his obligation forced him away from his own desires. A battle was about to begin. He turned to Arika and Calen.

"We go," he said. They followed quickly. Menol, with the head guards around him, swam toward the guards' quarters. So complete was this surprise that the guards had only moments before been awakened and told to make ready for battle. Even if a traitor lurked among them, Groff would have no warning. Hundreds of them swam into formation; they were immediately on their way.

En route, Menol and Arika described the location of the weapons cache to the head guards. If they were able to be in full attack before the alarm sounded, they could be at the cache before the weapons could be used.

Each guard, whether Groff's or the Caverns', carried his own weapons. When weapons shattered, which often happened, new ones were supplied. Menol intended to cut the enemy off before they used the spears, blades, and spike balls to draw his guards' blood. Reena's gift might be what turned the battle.

Groff was not sleeping well. Something was bothering him, and he did not know what it was. He felt angry, and tugged at the sleepnet until it opened. He swam out and looked through the draping of his entryway. There were six guards, swimming alert and ready outside his door. The head of his special guard hurried to him.

"My lord Groff, did you have some need?" the huge Mog asked.

"No, just make certain I am not disturbed," Groff ordered.

"Yes, High Elder." The guard returned to his post.

Groff went back into his sleep room, tugging at the jewels on his fingers. Despite his worries, the jewels caught his attention, and he admired them. He had more split-tail treasure than anyone. Boxes of it, and pearls too. He decided to look at his wealth. That always soothed him.

Groff went to one side of his room and methodically began removing neatly stacked stones from an entryway. First the large stone that hid the entrance, then all the smaller ones. It took some time, but then, Groff thought, that was the point.

Once all the stones were removed, there was a hole large enough for him to pass through. He brought a cage of glowfish in with him.

The sight that greeted him always made him smile. He never got tired of looking at it. It was a room, just smaller than his sleeping room, filled nearly halfway with pearls. They lay glimmering in all their whiteness, mute and powerful.

These pearls were powerful because they spoke for him; they bought loyalty, and death, and power. This was only one of the many rooms he had hidden in countless odd corners of the sea.

Groff swam into the middle of the pearly beach and lay down upon them, squirming until he had hollowed out a bed to cup his bulk. He rolled them over his belly and against his jowls. He waited for the warm sensation. Usually the softness of his treasures aroused him. But nothing happened. The longer he waited, the angrier he got. Worry plagued him.

"What is wrong!" Groff yelled, slamming his fist into the pearls. He heard the clicking sound as they tumbled away. He pushed himself up, careful to brush away the pearls lodged in the folds of his belly and underarms.

Was a storm coming? Not even his treasure could soothe him. Groff sighed and squeezed out of the entrance again, then began replacing the stones one by one. He had only half sealed the hole when he heard a sound that stunned him.

The alarm! Some fool had sounded the alarm—there couldn't be an attack. It was night. His informers had assured him nothing was planned.

"Guards! Guards!" Groff screamed.

Menol's guards made the five-day swim in four, and paused outside the darkened and invisible city only long enough to make their extra weapons ready.

Two of Groff's patrols had had the bad fortune to swim into the midst of three hundred battle-ready guards, and they were dead before their curses could be uttered.

Their plans long made, Menol, Arika, Ollon, and the guards swept over the city like a tidal wave. Though Menol's attacking guards were outnumbered two to one, they were filling up the sleeping guards' quarters and dispensing death. Battle cries shattered the silence, and these were screeched over by the warning blasts of the conch alarms. There was the sound of blade against blade, of clubs crushing skulls, and the cries of outrage.

From all around, Groff's guards appeared, and their surprise yielded to fury. They swung nets and stone axes, and Menol saw many of his own guards die. This battle would not be easily won. Menol used his spear to kill four separate Mogs determined to see him dead, but more came at him.

He chose a small band of his guards, and they separated themselves from the battle to travel farther into the bowels of this city.

Before they were away, Menol saw Arika turn just in time to avoid a stone ax through her skull, and with no joy of battle in her cry, she killed a Mog nearly twice her size.

Menol and his guards did not travel far before they found the weapons cache Reena had discovered. Many of Groff's guards were already drawing from it, ready to fight.

Knowing the battle must be won here, or not at all, Menol rushed into the thick of them, swinging furiously with his long blade. Had the conflict been waged in the Caverns, many innocents would have died. His own guards would have been so busy protecting the less battle-wise, they would have had no chance against Groff's superior numbers. They reached the weapons and broke them as they fought.

Menol kept his thoughts sharply focused on each opponent, seeing the hatred in each eye. He had to deaden his mind against the carnage. As the blood from his own

guards and the others tainted the water, he was reminded of the battle between the killer whales, and the disgust quieted him one moment too long. A huge Mog ran his shoulder through with a spear, and it was Ollon, coming from the next chamber, who killed Menol's attacker before he could finish his work.

"We have to find Groff," Menol yelled to Ollon above the ongoing battle. Ollon gestured to Menol's bleeding shoulder, and Menol shook his head. "He has to be nearby. I've seen more special guards." Menol pointed to a darkened passageway, and they swam toward it. The other guards were still deep in battle.

Most of the passageways were dark, but an occasional window to the sea above displayed the rose light of a new dawn. Or was it blood on the water? Menol wondered.

Ollon and Menol hunted for the chambers most likely to belong to Groff. They met guards along the way and fought furiously. At the end of a long passage, Menol saw Groff's own special guard, one he remembered from the Caverns. Groff could not be far away.

"There!" Menol pointed, and though there were six huge Mogs against them, he and Ollon rushed down the passage.

"At last, the battle comes to us!" the first and largest guard roared. He looked happy for the opportunity to join the fight raging all around him. He swung chain and a stone ax. As Menol faced him, he was surprised to see only three of the special guards move in to try to kill them, and in the brief moments he could look about he saw that Groff and others were packing sacks into a float sled that waited at an opening from the caves to the open sea.

Menol could not look again because his shield had been crushed beneath the blow of a spiked ball. His arm was not broken, but was of little use for the moment. He was suddenly pinned against a cave wall, and almost lost his head before he landed a fist to the guard's lungs. He wrenched free and swam behind the slow but massive guard. Taking the guard's own spear, he ran him through with it.

The next time he looked outside the cavern, the dawn shed enough light for him to see Groff strapping himself to the sled with his treasure. Menol heard a howl of victory and saw a special guard raising a long blade over

a stunned and drifting Ollon. Menol grabbed the muscled arm and kept the giant from cleaving Ollon in two. Menol was outmatched in strength, but his speed was still his advantage. When Ollon moved aside, Menol swooped down to retrieve a dropped shield and took four heavy blows against it before he could move against the Mog. Ollon was up and fighting the other guard, but his wound was to his head, and Menol knew he would not last long against the battle-hungry guard. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Groff escaping. There were three of his special guards, and perhaps seven others, to guard or pull the heavy sled. With seven to race away into the open sea, Groff could put much distance between them. Menol could catch him, and perhaps draw out more of his own guards in the pursuit, but at this moment, his own life, and Ollon's, hung in the balance.

A spiked ball grazed Menol's temple, and he saw his chance as the weight of the ball spun the giant off balance. Menol took his small blade and sliced at the Mog's throat. Menol ducked as the Mog, no longer interested in killing him, clutched his own bleeding neck.

Menol joined Ollon against the last guard, and just in time, for Ollon was weakened by his head wound and could see little. The huge guard was distracted by Menol's arrival long enough for Ollon to find his heart with a long blade.

Menol glanced down the passageway to be certain no one was around to finish off Ollon, then swam out the crevice through which Groff had escaped.

He looked in every direction, but Groff was nowhere to be seen. The bitter taste of killing filled his mouth. He returned to Ollon, who had drifted to the sandy floor.

Menol helped him to swim and guided him back to the main battle area. By the sounds, the worst of it was over, and the few who lived thought it better to flee.

When Menol and Ollon entered the main chamber, a cheer went up. Menol saw Arika. Though wounded, she swam quickly to them.

"Groff?" she asked.

"Escaped," Menol answered.

"I knew you looked for him, but every time I left with guards to aid you, more of his Mogs arrived."

"It matters little—we will not see Groff for a long time," Menol said.

"At least until he has time to regroup," Ollon managed. Menol found a woven plait to bind Ollon's head wound, then looked to his guards to see how many needed immediate attention.

"I will see to them," Arika said, though clearly exhausted. She stopped and turned to look back at Menol. There was no triumph in her face, only resolve. "We have done what we had to, Menol," she said. Menol nodded, and Arika turned to the guards who were hurt.

Just past a half-moon into their journey, Elan knew Menol had attacked Groff's city. She could not discern details. She could only ask the Balance to protect him, hoping Groff's plot to take the Caverns had been crushed. She and many of her guards were aware of the disturbance. Nemu was silent most of the day.

That night, as she listened for the Seadragon, Elan thought she heard Menol calling. It gave her comfort to know he was well, even if she did not know how he had fared in battle.

The quest for the Seadragon quickly fell into routine after that day. The largest body of the guards swam in a cluster around Elan. Each day different groups of guards swam ahead great distances to scout, as did Nemu, and others followed the main body.

Their general direction was northwest, and each day they made it a point to locate some part of the terrain that could be reached quickly should a storm hit. There was often no shelter, and Elan saw the guards at night sometimes practicing setting up the storm anchors. There was at first some confusion about them, but when they understood their use, they took special care with them. In the meanwhile, everyone watched the color of sea and sky for threatening change.

Around them each day, the terrain went from barren to rocky, from shallow to frightful deep water. When they saw food, sea vegetable or fish, lobster or crab, they took it, but they could not help but notice how little life there was. Had the growing menace sent creatures to hidden places? Elan could not understand it. The days stretched out until they ran together. So much of her time was spent listening, she felt she was in a trance, in some sort of half dream.

As darkness fell each night, a camp was made. Usually

the forward scouts tried to find a cave or shelter for Elan to hang her sleepnet, one that could be easily guarded. They knew that Groff's hunters wanted Elan dead, or better yet, to follow her to the Seadragon and then kill her. No matter what the outcome of the battle between Groff's guards and the Caverns, the hunters had not been intercepted. Groff needed nothing if the Between was dead. He could begin rebuilding his own forces, and his chances of success were better without the Between as ally to Menol and the Caverns. If he couldn't rule the Caverns, Groff would find some victory in pulling all to ruin around him.

The guards around Elan reasoned that if Kagor or the other hunters tried to attack, they would come at night. As camp was being made, six of the guards circled the location in the darkness, and the others set up sleepnets near Elan's shelter.

"Does Dehtu know cross-speaking?" Elan asked Nemu late one afternoon.

"Knows it, not," Nemu answered. Elan was warmed to see the closeness grow between Nemu and Dehtu. Many times as they swam, leagues went by with the two side by side, Dehtu discussing strategies, Nemu nodding. Each night as she entered her sleepnet, there was a ritual. Nemu first checked Elan, then swam past Dehtu, never far away from her.

"The Balance keep you well," Dehtu would say to Nemu, before the dolphin swam out to spend his night patrolling among the night guards. Guard and dolphin would only steal quick moments of sleep, and only if the other watched.

The guards spoke little during the day, and less at night. Dusk was the time the Merra searchers sent their cross-spoken messages to Elan from the open sea. Any clue or sighting of the Seadragon was followed.

"Your guards may speak," Elan often said to Dehtu. "The sound does not interfere with the cross-spoken messages." But they remained quiet. The Mogs among them could not understand how a voice could be heard from the inside, and the mystery of it only added to the reverence they felt for Elan.

If they were quiet at dusk, they scarcely breathed in the night. They had all been told that if Elan was to hear the Seadragon, if he were to call at all, it would be just as

she entered her dreams. Elan did not know they knew of this, and simply thought them all quiet, and at times overawed. Each night she lay tired in her sleepnet from the long day of unbroken swimming, waiting for sleep to take her. There was no peace in her dreams, only the abyss and Kagor, and the Seadragon slipping down some black hole beyond her reach.

Despite the fair weather, and though there had been no sign of hunters, some ominous current enveloped them. It had grown steadily more oppressive, and all felt it. It gnawed at the edges of their awareness, and as the days passed and the moon waned, Elan dreaded stopping and entering her sleepnet. In the stillness, there was no escaping the surrounding threat. Elan could not discern it from the water itself; it seemed everywhere. Soon they felt it during the daylight as well. Could it be coming from the black rock below them? Could they be drawing near the dying Seadragon?

Elan heard many voices in the dusk. She began to recognize them. Sometimes there were new voices of searchers who ventured through the open seas alone. One night, a voice came that Elan recognized.

<Do I know you?> Elan asked of the maid.

<I am Lanat,> she cross-spoke in return. <You saved me from an eel.>

<You learned cross-speaking?>

<To follow you, Between. I wanted to help too.> Lanat's voice was small in the boundless reach of sea.

Elan praised the young maid, asking her and the other searchers if they felt this ominous presence as well. They answered that they did, but no one found its source. Elan marveled at the courage of those who swam into the distant seas alone with nothing more than a blade and sleepnet. Every dusk came the same sorrowful message: no sign of the dragon.

Nor had Elan heard another calling from the Seadragon. He seemed quieted by this same malaise. It was so menacing, often there was no sleep for them in the night. Elan knew the guards were feeling the same sense of dread in the silence and darkness. They became disheartened, and the emptiness in their thoughts left room for this dread to expand. One night she began singing softly to dispel this darkness of the heart, and every night after that she sang, no matter how tired the day's swimming had left her.

Except for the terrible time when the Seadragon had gone mad and Elan's voice rose over the din of screams, few of the guards had ever heard a Merra sing. In some way none could explain, they were made well by her voice; the sweet courage in it made them love her more. After that, many of the guards found themselves able to sleep despite the gnawing menace. The songs wove through their dreams, and they woke refreshed and strengthened for the new day.

Two things made Kagor certain he neared the Merra Between. One, he had encountered more Merra hunters and their sharks, and two, he could feel the thrill of her nearness, and the heat of his long-awaited pursuit. Since the day he had seen her, as a child, his desire to hunt her had never dimmed. Her blood upon his lip had seared him, marking him as truly as his teeth had marked her flesh. As the Between was bound by her love for the Seadragon, so Kagor was bound by his hatred. He did not hate her, but the light about her gave him pain, and his pursuit of her gave him purpose.

Kagor had been impressed by the skill of the first Merra hunter he had encountered. He had thought the fight might be dull and the shark master bloodless. But the sharks were fierce and the Merra's control of them complete. It had been an exhilarating match of wills. Like a game, the sharks were worked against each other, the master foreseeing his opponent's moves, knowing his mind. Coldly the beasts came at each other, and the first unprotected flank was target, shark flesh and blood an invitation to frenzy. Kagor's favorite blue had inflicted the first blow, but even then, the Merra hunter had kept control.

It had only been because Kagor's beasts outnumbered the Merra's, and outweighed them by half, that the fight had not gone on for days. Kagor's excitement rose when the last of the Merra's sharks circled their master, trying to protect him. The sharks had not brain enough to know they would die, but the Merra knew, and met it as boldly as he could. Kagor liked courage.

As the blues circled their prey, darting in and back, prolonging the inevitable, Kagor felt his only real pleasure. It was an arousal of flesh and spirit, and it came when he killed something pure. It was why the Between

drew him as she did. He did not know how this had come to be his purpose, his destiny, but his need was to betray, as he had been betrayed.

The water grew more chill. Elan looked ahead of her at a distant mountain range. They looked no larger than sand hills, yet she knew from the netters' maps they had brought that they were higher than the clouds. The days blended together; the moon waxed and waned as they watched the plateau that bordered the dark abyss grow closer, then fall away behind them. Now they would watch another mountain range grow larger until it loomed above them.

Each day the sea changed colors, from gray green to icy blue to indigo. With the exception of one storm that trapped them in a small cave for two days, there had been only threats of storms. The storm that had trapped them found their scouts without shelter. These six guards had used the storm anchors, and though they had nothing pleasurable to report of two days playing the limpet crushed to a low rock while storm currents screamed across their backs, they were alive and returned to report that the Merra storm anchors worked.

Elan had been glad to see Nemu that day, nearly whisked into her cave on the first blasts, following her worried, cross-spoken directions.

Elan often spoke with the guards who were next to her, and gradually she learned something about each of them. She had come to love Dehtu in the same way she loved Nemu—for what he didn't say. They were perhaps the only two who sensed Elan's despair. While each night she sang to give the guards strength, she found herself looking into the eyes of her protectors. The mute voice of the dragon and the constant menace on the current weighed on Elan more than any of them, and that was why she suspected they had chosen their direction well. She was certain the Seadragon lay holed up somewhere in the rocks ahead. Whether it was days or another moon away she didn't know, but she was glad for Nemu and Dehtu's strength. If only the Squid were alive and could have come with her. Then she might have felt better about their chances.

They kept their eyes on the distant waters for signs of Seadragon or of enemies. Sometimes Elan would look at

the guards. Many of them were young, their skin and eyes clear. Menol had picked them well, and Elan worried every moment over their safety. There had been no sign of Kagor or the other hunters, and Elan hoped that she, with the others, would be lost from him in the sea's infinite vastness. The Seadragon was, why shouldn't they be as well?

Several of the guards had been injured. One had been bitten by an eel as he set up his sleepnet, and Elan had seen to his wound as she had several of them who had been stung by poison coral. All the guards seemed shy to be tended by her, and were surprised to be comforted by her ease and her nearness. Though she was almost formidable in her strength, and certainly in her armor and weapon, they felt her warmth and the sureness of her touch. All the guards were curious about the leaves she used, and that she made the pain go away was simply part of her mystery.

As this largest mountain range drew closer by the day, Elan grew more despondent. There had been no calling; all the voices that came to her in the dusk said they had had no sighting nor any sense of him. Elan's only cause for hope was that somehow, the increasing sorrow might be a beacon.

Finally they reached the base of these mountains. Many of the peaks broke the surface and towered in the sky. This range virtually stopped their northward progress, and the choice had to be made to follow them to the east or west. According to the map, to the east lay fields of hot sands, and to the west a desert, endless reaches of wasteland, tucked against the mountains. Should they go one way or the other? Or should they try to find some passage over the mountain range to continue north?

Elan knew all their trusting eyes were on her, but she felt she could only disappoint them. She had no idea which way to go. She had been hoping for a sign before they reached this range, but there was nothing. It was all the same, all empty and silent. Nemu cross-spoke to her.

<Homage song, Elan sing,> he suggested.

"That one?" Elan wondered why. She spoke briefly with Dehtu, then Nemu swam beneath her to take her quietly some distance away so her thought could be more still. Elan did as he suggested, feeling burdened and indecisive.

When Elan had finished the song, she heard nothing. Though her voice had been beautiful, the words had filled the guards with an unbearable melancholy. Perhaps they too sensed the dragon's nearness to death.

<Again sing,> Nemu said, <and again listen.> Elan did, and shut her eyes and stilled her mind to a quiet pool. It took some time, but there was something. Something faint—but it was a calling that ran a cold chill through her.

<A calling, you heard?> Nemu asked, seeing Elan shudder.

"Yes, but it wasn't the dragon, it was the voices from below, like the ones I heard in the abyss. The ones that beckoned me to my death," Elan whispered.

<Same voices the Seadragon hears,> Nemu reminded her. Elan at last understood what he meant. They came from the west, and she could hear them more clearly now. They called to her sweetly and promised her peace. A thrill ran through her. Not just because now she had some idea which way to go, but because she had discovered something else, something important. At what point had the change come?

"I don't want to die with him anymore, Nemu." Elan looked at him with a strange serenity. "If I wanted to die, I would go in that direction more willingly." She knew that as much as the voices repelled her, they must now sound lovely to the Seadragon who was seeking oblivion. That was the direction he would go. Elan reached for Nemu's dorsal and hugged him as they swam back to the waiting guards.

26

Whisper on the Current



When Dehtu and the others saw the change in Elan's expression, they knew she had heard something.

"Was it the Seadragon, Between?" he asked.

"Not him, Dehtu, but I heard the voices that call to him." They did not understand, but she was more certain of their direction, and they felt the same urgency to go on that she did.

They followed the range west, and Elan continued to hear the faint calling. She knew the dragon had not yet answered the voices, for if he had, they would have sounded different—more triumphant and mocking. No—they still waited, but they would not have to wait long.

As another day passed and the dusk began to creep over them, they stopped in a sheltered area at the foot of a purple mountain and began to make camp.

The forward guards had found Elan a protected cave, and she was securing her sleepnet when she was filled with a cross-speak voice so loud it sounded as if it were coming from inside the same cave.

<I see your guards in the distance.> It was a maid's voice, slightly frightened. <I am one of the searchers. May I make my camp with you?>

<Of course, which way do you come?> Elan asked. <One of the guards will come for you.>

Dehtu wanted to go, to be certain there was no foul play. By the time the maid neared the camp, Elan had learned that her name was Dria, and that she was to have continued north on her search but had found no passage in the mountain range. In this endless ocean the chance of running into someone else was as likely as two shoot-

ing stars colliding, and Elan was very glad for the company of a maid.

When Dria entered camp with Dehtu, Elan saw that the Merramaid was beautiful. Her hair was more red than Elan's and her eyes the color of a stormy day. Elan also saw that Dehtu was doing his best not to stare at her.

"Welcome," Elan said, swimming out to the maid. She felt an instant liking for Dria and took her by the hand. Both of them thanked Dehtu, and with a shy glance Dria took in the many fine guards who studied her respectfully. Elan knew some of their thoughts. Knowing how little they liked the menace on the current, they marveled that this maid had come so far alone.

Elan and the new Merra went inside the cave to secure Dria's sleepnet before it grew too dark to see. They shared their meal together, and when they had finished, they went outside the cave and looked out on the guards in the fading light of dusk.

Elan heard the cross-speaking from the other Merra searchers and told them of their westward direction along the range. She also heard the faint voices from the dark places. The ominous current was held back slightly, she thought. Something about Dria made the Between happy.

"You grew up away from the Caverns?" Elan asked. They did not use their cross-speak voices, knowing the sound of two maids talking softly together would make this desolate place less sinister.

"Yes, far away. I've been to the Caverns, but to the outskirts only. I've always wanted to see them, and all the beautiful things in the Center Place," Dria said. "Especially I would have liked to have seen it at the Choosing—and I would have been proud to have seen you there."

"The only good thing about the Choosing is seeing the Seadragon." Elan told all there was to tell about the magnificence of the creature in her tone of voice.

"I had heard it was too dangerous a time for Merra there," Dria said, the regret still fresh.

"It was dangerous, and finally more so than any would have feared—but you count your courage too lightly. You are swimming alone in a sea full of threat, and you do not complain," Elan praised her.

"I am used to the open sea, and not so to Mogs.

Besides, this must be done. It is my grand adventure—though a sad one.”

“We may find him in time.” Elan tried to sound more certain than she felt. She saw Dria looking about in the darkness. There was only starlight to see by, and it made the chill water more so, casting cold blue shadows across faces. Elan saw that Dehtu looked often at Dria.

“You feel the menace grow?” Elan asked.

“For many days.” Dria continued to look into the darkness, and wrapped her arms around her. “This is a bad place.”

“It is, and that is why I believe we will find him somewhere near.” The bleakness was overwhelming, and Elan’s thoughts turned to the loneliness of the guards, who swam endlessly in wide circles around the camp. “I am glad for your company, Dria.” Elan smiled at her.

“Do you hear him at all, Between?” Dria asked.

“No—I have heard nothing, and it makes me wearier than I can say,” Elan said quietly, not wanting the guards to hear her. “I fear to hear his voice in death only.”

“One’s own voice sounds so small in this void of a sea—I think that is why the Merras sang.” Elan knew Dria was right.

And because she sang every night, Elan opened her mouth again in song. Without thinking, in a voice that blended and harmonized, Dria sang with her. Both maids were so lost in the meanings of the songs and in the pleasure of not singing alone, that neither of them knew how enchanting was the sound that held back the darkness. In their voices, first intertwining, then soaring away, then back again, was all that was light and innocent in the sea.

Song followed song, and the guards who were listening were swept away, refreshed in their bodies and their spirits. The bittersweet chiming of the Merras answered all their dreams and made them proud. The guards who swam in the distance, unprotected in the night, took heart, and felt that the Merras’ song protected them, which it did. Their voices wove a web so fine and strong that even the calling from below was stilled. Nothing would touch them this night.

When at last they went to their sleepnets, in that drowsy place between waking and sleep, Elan heard the dragon. Faint and weak, but there, happy for her near-

ness. Elan asked Dria, half dreaming, "Did you hear him, Dria?"

"Yes, I did, Between," she said, and Elan was not surprised. Tonight it seemed only right, because they had been two Merra singing, and the Seadragon had heard them.

In the morning they broke camp. Nemu swam ahead to scout. Elan asked Dria to travel with them, and the only one happier than Dria about the suggestion was Dehtu.

When Elan told Dehtu and the guards that she and Dria had heard the calling of the Seadragon in the night, none of them was surprised. The only thing that had surprised them was to wake and find this a normal day, for something nameless had happened in the night that had touched them all.

As they traveled along the mountain range, Elan and Dria called to the nearest Merra searchers. The calling would fan out and eventually all would know they had heard the dragon. Some of the closest would join them, but they were yet leagues away, and days would pass before they converged.

The Merramaids, as well as the guards, were glad the calling had come from the direction they traveled. Staying near the range of mountains provided protection should another storm threaten.

Elan knew they had been fortunate to have had such ease with the weather. Perhaps this range was so formidable it altered the paths of currents, and swimming parallel to it sheltered them. The mountains piled one on top of the other and were laced with countless valleys and ridges. Caves dotted the rock faces and some of the valleys were so deep and distant no end could be seen. Elan was certain evil things lurked in the shadowy recesses, and often she and Dria exchanged glances of dread, knowing they neared something vile.

They traveled half the day. Elan felt alive with expectation despite the growing sense of menace. Often her stomach would clench and her hand went automatically to her blade. These warnings came so often Elan began to feel them common. That was why when a chill passed through her spine, and she felt the hairs on her arms stand up, she thought they had simply passed but one more shadow. Elan looked at Dria and their glance spoke of their wish to be beyond this place. But the feeling

lingered and, instead of passing, intensified. Elan looked at Nemu, who came closer to her. He was careful to keep all trace of fear from his expression, but their dread reverberated between them. He was as certain as she was, and Elan felt sick remembering. It was the same. It followed them, and the horror crept into their hearts. It was Kagor.

Elan fought the tightening in her lungs and watched the guards. They too felt the otherworldly chill and looked around them to find the specter. Her heart turned over when they looked to her for some answer, but there was only one answer, and it was inescapable.

Elan moved closer to Dehtu to speak with him quietly. She saw Nemu swim toward Dria to give a name to the strangling feeling that tightened every throat.

"What you and your guards feel is Kagor. His sharks have sensed us, and he follows." She kept her voice steady. She saw Dehtu stiffen. He knew of Kagor, and when Elan explained that the sense of doom came from the hunter's stalking heart upon them, Dehtu looked more fierce. It was the name of the one enemy he had learned to hate. He said the name out loud to his guards and they all grew grim with determination. This was why they had come.

Dehtu asked that four more guards drop back to reinforce those already behind. Elan gave them extra shark bane from her bag and told the guards no matter how far Kagor might be behind them, his speed with his beasts was faster than could be explained. These guards swam away with their weapons in hand, and Dehtu turned his attention to Elan.

They continued swimming, and when Nemu had finished explaining Kagor to Dria, the maid nodded, then swam closer to the Between and Dehtu. She hid her fear well, but the color had drained from her face. Dehtu looked as if he wished he could say something comforting, but he could find no words. Elan was glad to see that Dehtu's duty to protect her had expanded to included Dria. She had thought that after the abyss, and her nearness to death after the Seadragon, nothing could frighten her again. But this was different. Her fears for herself were nothing compared to her fears for those she cared about, these friends around her. The terror had found a whole new part of her to invade.

As the day passed and the dusk grew nearer, the ominous presence pressed in around them. It drew so close Elan felt debilitated by it, and it took all her effort not to swim to Nemu or Dehtu and hold them. Dria took her hand, and for a moment they both stopped trembling.

But as darkness came, and they began setting up their camp, the guards who had followed did not arrive. They were to have come for what sleep they could find, while other guards would take their places patrolling the surrounding water.

They waited, staring into the black water, longing for some calling from them, but there was nothing. A terrible silence. Elan looked in Dehtu's strong and gentle face and knew the moment he admitted his guards would not return that they had been taken. No one spoke of it, and that night there were ten guards and Nemu who circled, and five who hovered outside Elan and Dria's cave. The rest tried to sleep, but could not.

Though the Merras searched within, they mourned to find no songs in them. Elan looked for solace in sleep, and would begin to fall away, but like some strange and sad beacon, the Seadragon continued to call to her, wondering where she had gone. Elan would not answer, for all she had to share with him was her terror.

In the morning, even the light brought no comfort. The blackness of the craggy mountains seemed to suck all the light from the sky. What remained of it was tainted by Kagor's threat.

Morning also brought with it another horrible discovery. Nemu had heard nothing, nor had the two guards who returned of the ten who circled, but the rest had disappeared. There had been no sound or struggle, and no trace of them was found by the searchers. Elan saw the wild light of fear pass through those who remained. It was as if some insatiable demon followed, whose power was beyond contesting.

"He is only a hunter, and they are only sharks," Dehtu said, for he too saw how the fear affected his guards. They were loyal and would fight if they had some foe, but this death that crept in shadows was unbeatable. Elan mourned that she had brought them here, and because there was nothing she could give them.

As they swam in the direction of the calling, she was filled with doubts. Was she leading the killer to the

Seadragon? Were these deaths worth any price? Would she be able to sing to the Seadragon when she found him? She felt Nemu swim close to her, and she was grateful for his nearness and strength.

"Do we lead him there, Nemu?" Elan asked, unsure.

<There, we must go.> Nemu kept his eyes ahead, searching. All of them stayed together this day; Dehtu would risk no more guards ahead or behind.

The menace continued to build, and the seascape around them gradually changed. It had become an unforgiving emptiness, with the towering mountains alongside it. The sand was completely flat, the color of rust. From this reddish plain, first a few, then many tall ghostly spires, like bones, rose into the shadowy sea. In the distance, the sand dropped suddenly into a strange valley that fell between two mountains.

Elan felt drawn as she looked into this valley, and when she glanced at Nemu and Dria, she saw that they stared into it with the same intensity. Whether the place held danger, or some nearness to the dragon, Elan could not tell. She thought suddenly of the Squid and missed him terribly. She thought of Menol and how much he depended on her finding the dragon. She thought of the guards who had been killed and of the Seadragon, who had come here simply to find some peace in death. Then there was Kagor.

As Elan and the others drew nearer this mysterious place, the menace of the hunter and his sharks sharpened. They knew he was near. Their eyes searched in every direction, dreading the first vision. The water seemed poisoned, and there was no place, no thought that could protect them. Dehtu finally stopped. Elan could tell something bothered him beyond this oppression. She waited until he made whatever decision was troubling him.

"This valley we approach is bad," he said, looking into it with narrowed eyes. Elan followed his gaze and saw the mountain walls continue up past the surface. It was a huge oblong bowl, and they neared the only entrance.

"Because there is no way out?" Elan asked, and Dehtu nodded, looking over his shoulder as she had seen many of the guards do. It was instinct to look for what followed, even though the malevolence came from all sides at once. Dehtu looked at the disappointment in Elan's face.

"Something calls from there?" he asked, wondering if they could be close to the dragon. Elan didn't know. Something called, but it was both voices, the one from the abyss and the dragon's mournful song. They could be coming from anywhere.

"I don't know, Dehtu" was all she could say. Her fear of Kagor dulled her senses, and that fear was being crowded by another. What if this strange valley held another abyss? What if this place was the source of all the voices that called innocence down? Is that why the Seadragon had come here? Was he hovering at the edge of some precipice? Elan looked at Nemu, then Dehtu.

"If we get nearer, can your guards protect the entrance while Nemu and I go in?" she asked.

Dehtu studied the mouth of the valley solemnly. "We could, but I would not have you go alone."

"Wouldn't you have a better vantage of attack from the mouth, and anything that would find us would have to pass you?" Elan ventured.

Dehtu studied the valley again, with a sense of building urgency. He looked at Nemu. "If anything goes amiss, you will ride back to whatever guards remain for protection?"

"If it is possible, we will," Elan assured him.

Dehtu still did not like it. He thought another moment and decided something. "I will send five of the guards to double back. It is possible that Kagor is so busy trailing us, we can have some advantage in surprise."

The plan worried Elan. Five guards would have little chance against Kagor's killing blues. Before she could say so, Dria spoke.

"It would be a better advantage if I went with them. It may be I have a keener sense of him and could warn of his direction." Dria controlled her voice. "Then without sacrificing another five to Kagor, we could find him and stay hidden, and warn the rest. It will only work if I can go, and cross-speak his advance."

"It is much too dangerous," Dehtu protested quietly, fear for Dria in his expression.

"But the danger seems not to increase or decrease by distance from this Kagor." Dria's eyes were wide with her fear, for this was not an offer she made foolishly. "The risk is equal for all of us, and I will bend to your decision for your experience of battle is greater than

mine, but I can be of help. If the dragon is near, the Between must not be stopped from reaching him."

Dehtu ached with his responsibility for their safety. Dria looked at Elan, and Elan knew she was right, though the thought of her leaving the main body of guards was as disquieting to her as it was to Dehtu.

"If you say that she can go, perhaps your guards will take fewer chances. Their first responsibility will be just to warn from where he comes," Elan said to Dehtu. "You must tell your guards to fly when they see him; do not try to take him with so few, or their lives will be wasted." Elan looked at Nemu. "We know too well his ability to find his prey, and if he knows of you first, you will be lost, for there is no outracing him." They were silent a moment, and Elan swam closer to Dria. She knew Dria could not be dissuaded, even with her fearful warnings. "Your only advantage will be that the confusing voices of this place will somehow throw him off your course. Do not let him nearer than a speck in the distance."

"I like it little," Dehtu said, resignation in his tone, "but if they rejoin us as soon as Kagor is spotted, then we will meet him all together."

"Unless we stop Kagor, there will be no place of refuge." Dria laid her hand upon Dehtu's arm. Dehtu at last relented and chose five of his remaining guards. They surrounded Dria, who smiled at Dehtu and Elan. With no more said, they doubled back the way they had come.

<We watch for him, Between. I will tell you of our progress,> Dria called out as they swam.

<Take all care, Dria,> Elan answered.

Elan stared after them a moment, and caught a stray thought from Nemu at her side. He had not cross-spoken it, but when she looked at him, she placed her hand over the armor at her breast and stifled a cry.

<I must call her back,> Elan choked.

<She would not come,> Nemu said.

<She means to draw him to her—to decoy him to give us time.> Elan laid a trembling hand upon Nemu.

<Yes.>

<Dear Nemu—I lose heart in this.> Elan closed her eyes.

The dolphin gave her moments. <Between?> Nemu asked, and Elan looked at him. <She chosen has, and so we must.> There was no time for grief.

Elan started toward the valley once again with the grim Dehtu and the remaining guards around her. They swam very fast and covered the vast distance. Still, the valley loomed ahead. Nemu swam close to her, and Elan turned to her friend.

<Do you have a sense of this place?>

<Much evil. If the Seadragon here is, Nemu knows not.>

<Nor do I—I feel I should know.> Elan looked back, but Dria was not visible.

Ahead of them, the valley mouth grew. The mountains were much larger than any they had ever seen, and the jagged lay of them promised no mercy. To the living things they dwarfed they brought a sense of profound insignificance.

<You will come with me up this valley, Nemu?> Elan asked. <There may be only the darkness to greet us.>

<Nemu will come,> he answered. Elan had never doubted he would, but she could not expect him to face such a hopeless place without choice. It was the starkness of it that made it so haunting. The two walls of the valley towered purple black and glistening, narrowing toward the farthest end. The flat expanse of the valley floor was pierced by rising white bone spires—the bones of Seadragons.

They entered the mouth of the valley. Dehtu looked carefully at what they passed through, which rocks and crevices might offer the best protection. The time for them to separate drew near, and Elan saw he cared little for it.

The calling grew louder. Elan was more certain than ever that something important was in this gorge. It was such a morbid place she knew it must be the end of the earth and sea. A place where Seadragons came to die.

She heard Dria's whispered cross-speak message.

<We have seen nothing of him yet,> she said quietly. <We have just passed the blue rocks again—have you entered the valley?>

<We are within the walls,> Elan answered, then remembered something. <Take great care in your cross-speaking, Dria, that it comes to only me. Kagor is Merra.> She did not know if Nemu had said this. She could tell by the sickened silence from Dria that she had not known, nor

believed Merra capable of such evil. <How do your guards look?>

<They are very brave. We are coming to the place Gyu wants to turn and travel more concealed,> Dria said.

<Good.>

<We turn now—I will call later . . .> Dria's voice trailed off.

Dehtu had found cover that suited him, and slowed. Elan looked at the stacks of polished black boulders. In them were crevices and many places to back into and still wage battle. Some of the boulders had broken from the valley walls and glistened like malevolent crystals.

Elan was anxious to go ahead, and as Dehtu placed his guards, she looked up the valley with Nemu. They would stay near one side or other of the valley, so they had to decide which towering wall afforded the fastest route.

Elan swam to Dehtu to tell him of their decision, and suddenly screamed, clutching her head. Dehtu grabbed her by the shoulders and held her while she writhed.

"What is it?" Dehtu yelled, but Elan had trouble hearing above the cross-spoken screams that filled her head. She had no room for thought above their piercing shriek. Her eyes rolled back in her head. "What is it, Elan? What can I do?" Dehtu was desperate.

"It's not me, it's Dria!" she yelled, trying to send some calming image to Dria, who was faced with mortal danger. Elan heard the faint cross-speak of the Merra, weak with horror and breaking often.

<They came from on top of us—the sharks are frenzied—tearing—there is blood—the guards are being torn—>

<Find someplace to hide!> Elan commanded. <Someplace low where they cannot get at you!> She forced herself into Dria's mind fiercely, and as if she were in both places at once, Elan guided Dria, and saw what she saw.

The sharks circled, the jagged teeth bared in a grin as their jaws opened and closed awaiting prey. Young Gyu, already dead, trailed behind the largest beast. As the shark had attacked him, the guard had swung his net and plunged his blade deep. Though the knife pierced the hide, the shark was not slowed, and bit savagely through Gyu's chest. The net snagged the head of the shark and attached to Gyu's arm; the shark could not free himself

from the weight of the body. The blue shook its head to untangle the webbing.

Dria saw none of this as she swam fiercely for a vertical crevice she saw in a cliff face. Behind her, she heard the quiet but determined cross-spoken commands of Kagor. It chilled her blood, but driven by Elan, she flew.

Kagor followed, his beasts fighting with the remaining guards. He had not had a clear look at the Merra, and Dria knew he was confused. Could this be the Between? She wanted him to think so. She had to reach the cliff before he reached her. She felt as if he were close enough to touch her with his killing hands, but she would not look back. She did not want him to see her face and give up his pursuit. As long as he thought she might be the Between, she could draw him, and the longer she could keep him, the greater Elan's chances.

She reached the crevasse. It was of black glassy rock, and the crack looked too small to enter but she pressed herself in, her cheek laid against the cold stone, her fingers reaching back for any small knob to pull her in deeper. She felt the first smash of Kagor's spiked ball against the stone behind her; still, she would not turn her face.

She could feel the sharp glass edges cut her breasts and cheek, so tight was this tomb, but it would save her, because Kagor was too large to follow. She could not stop, however, for he carried a spear among his weapons, and she felt his thoughts turn to it. She could get no deeper and she felt the first thrust of the spear. The point of it found her shoulder and pierced the muscle. Dria screamed, and Kagor jabbed again. She forced herself in once more and wondered, if she lived, would she ever be able to free herself? But this time, the point just flicked the skin. She heard Kagor grunt, and blocked her thoughts. He was trying to penetrate her mind. He had some sense that this was not the Between, but what confused him was that Elan was in Dria's mind. She was there in cross-speak, and Kagor could not yet separate them. Dria knew it was too dark for Kagor to see her clearly, and though it terrified her, she turned her head. She saw his horrid form there, staring in, and beyond him the carnage.

Elan opened her eyes and saw Dehtu's concerned face near hers. He waited for the worst.

"It's Kagor?" Dehtu asked.

"He has attacked them," Elan said.

<I've found a place>—Elan could hear the sobbing chokes in Dria's cross-speak—<two of the guards are dead, and the others are fighting.> It took all of Dria's will to watch, and to report what she saw.

"You must go to them," Elan said to Dehtu.

Dehtu's eyes grew dark with his divided loyalties. "I cannot leave you, Between," he said. "I will send more guards, but the bulk must remain."

<I can see him,> Dria managed weakly. <Kagor is there—there is much blood in the water—a cloud of it—his beasts tear away pieces of the guards.>

Elan waited, and told Dehtu all she had heard. She watched him grow white.

<He looks at me. He thinks I may be you. His eyes are as dead as his sharks'.> Dria could not conceal the hopelessness in her voice. <He will not let them feed,> she choked.

<What?> Elan asked, as if she were yelling above the roar of the killing feast.

<He will not let his beasts—I can see ten—eleven—he will not let them feed from the dead—he is saving their hunger—oh Elan!> It was a cry so helpless, it tore at Elan's heart.

She turned to Dehtu, who had already chosen seven of his remaining guards to head back.

"Seven will not help, you have to go to her. Dria still lives, and you may be able to save her and what remains of your guard," Elan cried.

"But I cannot leave you unprotected!" Dehtu agonized.

"If you meet him there or here, it matters not. I fly with Nemu. Dria and the last of your guards need you. They are near the blue rocks, and he will not expect direct attack. I think it our only chance. You will find him in a cloud of your guards' blood," Elan yelled. This stung Dehtu, and though the decision tore him in two, he gave the command to his guards and they sped away.

"We fly up this valley," Elan said.

"And the walls of these black mountains will collapse before Kagor will have you," Dehtu vowed, and he too sped off after his guards.

Elan hesitated for the briefest moment, remembering too well how quickly Kagor had followed in the storm.

<Dria! Dria!> she cross-spoke. <Can you hear me?> Elan knew that she was there, still alive. <Dria, they come for you. Press back into your hiding place, make yourself as small as a limpet and don't go from that place until you see Dehtu!> Nemu nudged her shoulder. They had no more time to lose. In a burst of speed, they flew into the valley.

"If the Seadragon isn't here, we've lost, Nemu." Elan looked over her shoulder as they sped away. "And even if we find him, we invite Kagor."

All thoughts of the horror so close behind them were gone, all questions of what might lay ahead were a haze. There was only their speed. They raced past more white blades of bone, and what little light there was in this dark place caught off the reflective faces of the crystallized chards that had broken from the steep valley walls and sprouted like a grotesque garden from the sand below.

Ahead of them the farthest wall of the valley showed itself to be a mountain, butted up against this crack in the seafloor. It towered up and over them. Elan could feel the pain in her lungs and her hair streaming back. The white spires they passed seemed to warn them not to go farther. Inside her Elan heard the faint call of the Seadragon, steady and unchanged despite her own terror and need.

As they drew nearer the back of the gorge, the calling of the voices grew louder. The sounds were more sinister than ever, echoing off the towering walls. Elan glanced at Nemu in her speed; he heard them as well. They weren't cross-spoken voices coming like thoughts. They roared through ears and head, and they came from this place. Elan caught the flash of recognition in Nemu's eye. This was the source. As lava found its way through fissures in the earth or spewed from volcanoes both undersea and above, so these voices traveled. The same ones filled the hole Elan had gone into for the Choosing, and they traveled through cracks in the belly of the earth, issuing poison where they could. From here had begun the shadow that crept through hearts on the far side of the world.

<What are they, Nemu?>

<The noise that darkness makes. Good dies not, nor does evil. It collects. In this place, it collects,> Nemu said, intent on reaching the end of this valley. The roar

of this menace was thick, and nearly impenetrable. It sucked the will from them.

Elan began to slow. All of her ached, but her biggest fear was that there was no sign of the dragon, and they were nearing the solid wall. They had not passed him, yet ahead there was nothing but the morbid barrenness of the towering walls and the red sands. As they slowed in the center of this colossal bowl, Elan wondered if they had come too late. Had the dragon's call been a haunted echo trapped in the valley?

Gasping, Nemu and Elan looked at one another, unable to keep despair from creeping over them.

"He's gone—we're too late, Nemu." Elan felt a sudden chill and thought it stemmed from her sense of utter failure. But the warning was familiar—Elan vehemently denied the possibility. She saw the flash of fear pass through Nemu and felt the creeping nausea of approaching death. Something blue and fast shot near them. She looked above her directly into Kagor's eyes. It was impossible that he could have come so fast, yet here he was. The hunter gloated at the nearness of his long-awaited prey. There was nothing but silence from him, but Elan knew he gave cross-speak commands to his sharks. Kagor looked as if he could have been born in this place. His eyes gleamed as black as the walls, and his muscular body fused shadow into flesh. He held gruesome spiked weapons and his mouth parted in a half smile of expectation.

"I am sorry, Nemu," Elan whispered. He would never fly now, never know his freedom over the waves. The Between and dolphin looked above them as Kagor and eleven blue sharks came down at them. There was no frenzied rush, no instant attack of tearing teeth, just the methodical arms of the trap, closing in. It was Kagor's own ballet. His art.

Elan was mesmerized by the beasts who, one by one, fell into a moving circle around them. The sharks were never still, and Elan could see the frustrated roll of their lifeless eyes as they measured what would at last fill their empty bellies. The circle grew smaller and smaller around them. She knew Kagor waited to give the signal, knew what kind of pleasure this was to him. Killing was his dance. Her sorrow was that there were no songs in this dead place, and she had led Nemu here to die with her.

There was no dragon to hear her say good-bye. Elan drew her knife.

Two of the sharks broke from the circle and, making their angular cuts through the water around them, came closer. Elan could see the mute gaping of their teeth. Without warning, Nemu raced out and butted the closest beast in the side. He hit with such force that a huge hole opened in the shark's gill. Elan screamed a warning. Nemu did not see the attack of the second shark, and was struck violently, the shark's jaws tearing out his side. The beast let go the flesh it had torn from Nemu, and shot toward Elan. Its jaws glanced off the armor at her breast and cut her at the waist and hip where the armor no longer protected. As the shark cut away from her, Elan saw the mortal wound, deep in the flank of her beloved friend. It had quieted him. A silent scream filled her, and she watched as Kagor called off his killers once again, to prolong his pleasure. Nemu, floating upside down, drifted away on an icy current.

Kagor was saving his blood lust for Elan, and she hovered motionless, straight-backed, prepared for death. She thought briefly of the luti and the Nemu. Would she be calling them too late, and to their deaths, like her sweet Nemu? She reached for the shell at her waist for comfort; she found blood from her wound and no shell. The shark's attack must have torn it from her.

Elan threw back her head, determined not to give Kagor the added pleasure of seeing her die badly. A rage was filling her, white hot like the sun. She hoped the end would come soon, because the anger that seared in her was stronger than any passion. The rage and the violence burned behind her eyes, and she felt she would burst with it, that creatures like Kagor had the power to still what was good. Elan felt not herself, but a personification of anger so overwhelming that when the first shark came toward her, instead of being afraid, she thought that if she grabbed its eye she could find its small brain and kill the beast with her hands. Her blade would shred its hide—

The ground beneath them began to rumble. Elan was not surprised, and thought it was only an extension of her rage. She looked at Kagor, so intent on the closeness of her death and his own pleasure that he did not feel the

shadow coming over him. The shark that attacked her was distracted, and veered away, and Elan looked up.

Flashing red and purple rage, the Seadragon swept over them, all tearing limbs and talons. Elan looked up at the endless expanse of glistening white scales of underbelly, and she swam higher. Kagor gave a signal to call off his sharks, and they fell in around him. Elan swam hurriedly near the Seadragon's head and saw him staring hotly at Kagor.

She was about to cross-speak to the dragon when she glanced once more at Kagor. It sickened her to see that instead of fear, he looked aroused. This was better than he could have dreamed. It was only then that Elan sensed the mortal weariness in the Seadragon. He had been close to death, and the rage he had been filled with had been only her own, spilling over into him in the private place he had found to die. Black and gray waves began to ripple over his skin as the red fluctuations disappeared. Elan knew she had only called him back a moment from his dying. And for this! She cried. She felt shame that she had led the wondrous creature, the last of his kind, to this horrid death, piece by piece in the jaws of Kagor's blues.

"Come, my handmaidens, come feast on the last that is magic." Kagor's voice filled the valley with his triumph.

"No!" Elan's scream pierced and echoed its way down the valley. The dragon's eyes barely flickered with interest as the blues began to circle him.

"No!" Elan called out again at all that was about to be lost. Through a frantic haze, she caught sight of streaks of movement coming toward her and the Seadragon, and she was ready to fight until she died. Part of her waited, ready, another part of her denied. Suddenly she knew what she had seen streaking toward them were not sharks, but Dehtu and his guards. She could not see how many had survived, but she saw them attack the sharks with their blades, and the water boiled with the frenzy of their battle.

Blood clouded and left everything in a gruesome mist. The sharks were nearly impossible to kill because of their speed and the thickness of their hide. Kagor watched Elan, his lips still parted in a half smile.

There were guards dying. Elan dodged two attacks and the thrashing of a shark as it savaged a guard near her. It

tore the flesh away and, no doubt ordered by Kagor, turned once, twice, and shot toward her. The blue's eyes rolled back; its jaws opened and closed. Elan grew tense, her knife ready, but before she turned to face the circling beast, Dehtu cut across the shark's path. The shark turned its blood lust against Dehtu, and as Elan rushed to join him in the fight, she heard a high-pitched scream she recognized.

"Dria!" Elan called out, unable to see the other Merra in the carnage. She looked toward the Seadragon, and at last spotted Dria. She was struggling, aiming powerful kicks of her tail at two sharks who tore savagely at the hind haunch of the Seadragon. The beasts tore streaming mouthfuls of flesh from the wound they made more and more foul. Elan raced at them and without thinking slashed at the backs of the two frenzied blues. The blade would not penetrate the thick skin, and their ripping slowed not the slightest. Dria picked up a rock and tried to smash their eyes, but this didn't touch them either.

Elan, stabbing one in the eye herself, saw the dragon weakly try to kick them free but give up in a daze at the evil boiling around him. She felt a sudden calm and knew what to do. If the dragon shifted at all, she would be crushed, but she cross-spoke to him, pressed herself against the side of his haunch near the spreading wound, and slid low against the sandy floor. Beneath the frenzy of the beasts the sand whipped and stung her, and she was all but blind in the blood. She could see them thrashing above her and heard the gnashing, tearing sound.

Elan got directly beneath the wiggling white belly of the nearest shark and gripped her knife with both hands. With all her strength she drove it upward, tearing it the length of the soft underbelly of the slaughtering blue. The knife sank in, and the shark's entrails spilled out around her hands and arms. The filth came near her face as she backed closer to the dragon. At the same moment, with all the force in her cross-speak mind, she slammed a thought into the dying shark, that the blue had done it, the blue was her enemy!

Fascinated by the simple horror of it, Elan watched the dying shark let go of the dragon and sink its teeth into the belly of the other blue. A bellow of rage erupted from Kagor. For the first time, Elan saw him wild with uncontrolled anger, and he raced at the fighting sharks.

Elan shot out and pulled Dria away as Kagor roared, pounding at the beasts to separate. Another of his vicious handmaidens left the guard she killed when she saw the other two fighting, and joined in, ripping with her serrated teeth at the mass of intertwined muscle that fought against itself. Kagor swung a lead ball of spikes over and over at their backs to stop them, and in the shooting pain he gave them, Elan forced a cross-speak message of confusion at this pain. All the blows brought them was a deepening of their rage at each other.

A handful of guards, torn and bloody, fought with the sharks that kept their distance from the frothing whirlpool of beasts and hunter. The blues became a writhing mass, and with Kagor pounding, they rose by their own thrashing. They did not see that they drifted closer to the lolling head of the Seadragon. Elan opened up to the ancient creature, shared with him her rage for living. Though she knew she tempted death again by doing it, she used all of her will and all of her being to awaken one small spark in the dragon. Just a faint light, like the one that drew her up from the abyss; she would be his light. She filled him with all the songs and all the goodness she knew. He raised his head. He opened one fierce eye and looked for the source of the malice. His gaze fell upon Kagor.

Kagor felt the impending danger and stopped beating his sharks. He first dropped his blood-cold gaze upon Elan below, then in stunned disbelief he looked above him and kicked violently to flee. But it was too late. The cavernous jaws of the Seadragon opened wide, and before Kagor could scream his outrage, they took him as their own, biting him in half. Kagor's eyes, which had always been lifeless orbs, at last looked out from death. The Seadragon spat out the foul pieces of him.

The instant their master was dead, the remaining sharks knew, and in one motion, they disappeared into the haze of blood and gray sea around them. Elan tried to keep the numbness from taking her. She knew it was the death of the Seadragon that was again creeping over her. She had shared with him, and now Betweened dangerously. She had to fight against it. It could all be lost or won in this moment.

Elan looked down at the few guards who remained alive. She saw that Dria had found the fallen bag of

healing leaves and was already tending to them and binding the worst wounds. With a rush of painful memory Elan remembered Nemu and held back a cry. She glanced a moment at the dragon and saw his head falling to his breast.

Elan raced off in the direction she had seen Nemu drift. How cold the water suddenly felt to her. Kagor was dead, but the chill of ominous death this valley promised was still strong. Elan searched the gray distance, looked in every crevice and behind every large stone. She had to find the loyal Nemu, who would not fly because of his duty to her. Elan searched where the waves played against the dry air, and she saw his silvery form there, floating near the surface.

"Oh, Nemu." Her insides clenched as she swam to him and put her arms around him. He was still warm. Elan threw her grieving head up to look into his eyes. She saw that they were open, but could not see out. He was trapped inside his pain and his struggle to live. She took a firm grip of him and swam with him toward Dria, Dehtu, and the others. She needed the healing plants.

She thought she was numb, that she had no more strength, but she carried the dying Nemu as easily as he had carried her so many times. She was making her way to the others, but felt him struggle a moment and call her name.

<Elan, Between.>

She stopped swimming and looked into her friend's warm eyes. She knew he was dying. <Yes, Nemu?>

<Nemu, sorry is, this journey not to finish.> Elan watched his eyes grow more dim as he struggled to find her in the encroaching darkness.

<I have loved you since the first moment I saw you.> Elan knew he could no longer see her, so she held him close in her arms, stroking his skin and pressing her cheek to his. When his cross-speak voice came to her it sounded joyous, and far away.

<Nemu flies.> Elan hugged him tightly, and said his name. She knew the moment the life went from him.

<Farewell, beloved friend.>

Elan swam with him to the others. Dria and two guards came up to meet her. She also saw that the dragon was not in the valley but had returned to rest in his dying place again. Dria carried her sleepnet and they wrapped

the dolphin in the gentle weaving. Elan looked at Dria, who was sliced across her breast and shoulder but able to swim. Dehtu, who had saved her life, was barely alive. There were four others who still lived. Elan told them all what she wanted.

"Dria will take you from this place of death. None of you will heal here." She turned to Dria. "You remember the small valley before we came to this one, before the bones started?" Dria nodded. Elan still held Nemu. "Please take him. I do not want him left in this place."

"You go alone for the Seadragon?" Dria asked, frightened Elan would meet more peril.

"I must." Elan looked puzzled as she stared at the solid walls around them.

"He swam toward there." Dria pointed high up the face of the towering black mountain.

"Go now," Elan said. "Dehtu is near death, keep the c'tor on them—you know of healing—"

"We will find the next valley, I will tend them," Dria said. The Merra glanced at the high wall where she had last seen the Seadragon. "May the Balance bless and keep you, Between," she whispered, and those guards who could speak said the same.

Elan laid her hand once more on Nemu's side. Two of the less-injured guards carried him; the others helped Dria carry Dehtu. Without another word, Elan sped after the Seadragon.

The water where the fighting had occurred was still clouded with blood. Elan could hear the voices calling her and the Seadragon down; they had stilled only slightly. There was an edge of triumph to them, and she knew they would soon have their most precious prize.

Hair streaming behind her, Elan felt the tug of the water against a torn arm shield. She unfastened it without slowing and let it drop to the valley floor. Menol's armor had saved her life, and bore the scars of the sharks' jaws. She felt a tattered piece fluttering against her tail, and again, without stopping, reached back to pull it away. As she brought it around to her, her heart leaped. It was her luti, hanging by the silver chain Tia had woven and caught in the links of her breastplate. The sharks had torn it from her. She tied it around her neck.

Elan knew the dragon was near. He had had no life in him to take him too far from this valley. She had asked

too much perhaps, that he kill Kagor. But it had been done, and now she would make one last fight. She would raise her voice against the dark calling, and either he would answer his Between or she would follow him down.

Elan swam up the onyx cliff face. Huge angular pieces of the mountain had fallen away, leaving spikes and ridges. Nothing grew here, and Elan looked above her and felt more confused. It looked as if the mountain broke the surface without allowing any passage beyond, yet Dria had seen the dragon go this way. Elan sensed he was close and had begun to think she'd been tricked by the voices when she saw a wide gap between two ridges above her. It was obstructed by a lower ridge. As she swam closer she saw it was large enough to allow the dragon to pass, and was the only place he might have gone. She picked up her speed, nearly racing for the passage. The sense of impending doom had slowly given way to a dullness that frightened her. She recognized it again as loss of the will to live, yet she knew she had to continue to fight against it.

Elan swam up finally into the broad gap and, coming over the top of it, looked down into the next valley. This valley was as deep as the first, but much smaller. It was more like a hole or a nest. At first she saw nothing, but then a movement caught her eye. It was the Seadragon, small in the distance below her. She wondered again, why this place, when she saw that the dragon was wrapped around something. Whatever this thing was, the dragon held it tightly, his head laid over the back of it. Elan couldn't imagine what it could be.

As she swam down she forced herself to sing the homage song. It seemed to fall into a hollow place; the Seadragon did not stir. Elan studied this strange thing he was curled around, and did not like it. It appeared to be a split-tail ship, but like none she had ever seen. It was nearly as large as the Seadragon, and of metal. It was long and tubular and the color of dull green moss. On its back a tower rose and both ends were rounded.

Elan continued to sing as she drew near the Seadragon, and he heard her now. He opened one weary eye only partly, and in it she saw her own death. His departure had begun and no song would rouse him. The dragon shifted his position to find more comfort and Elan saw that something evil must emanate from this ship. Pieces

of the dragon's scales pulled away from his body and hung in wispy chunks to the hull of the vessel. As he shifted again to pull himself closer to this killing ship, the huge hull rocked and creaked, and Elan's eyes widened in shock. Skittering from holes in the hull were a multitude of creatures. But none looked as they should. Crabs stumbled on too many legs, their shells grotesque and misshapen. Rockfish darted, their eyes well behind their fins. Elan thought she saw an eel with two heads joined. She felt dazed. What split-tail horror was this?

The huge wound the sharks had chewed in the Seadragon's hind haunch oozed blood slowly. These were his final moments. A quiet despair filled Elan. The dragon would not answer the calling down, he would not give in to the evil, but he had found this thing instead. And to Elan it looked as if the Seadragon had made it his mate. He had curled up around it in his loneliness, and knew that somehow, in return for his closeness, this split-tail ghost ship would envelop him in its killing breath. How was she to fight against this thing? She didn't know what it was. This was some ethereal battle, her will against the darkness. She had only her voice as weapon, and how small it would sound in this valley.

A wave of hesitation passed through her. Easier to follow him and to find rest, she thought. But she screamed out against it. As she opened her mouth, the water across her tongue had only death on it. She had come so far to find him, she could not surrender. Not yet.

Slowly, like a storm building, Elan's blood grew thick with her need to protect her charge. She was Between, and her Seadragon, the last dragon, was about to be taken from her. She used her outrage to sharpen her will, and called on what little good she could draw from the Balance in this evil place. She swelled with her purpose. The Balance, and everything in her life, had brought her to this moment. She had to call the Seadragon back.

Elan swam up to where the Seadragon's head rested across the back of the killing ship. She hovered before his eyes and felt what little breath came from him surround her. She took it in her mouth and knew the dwindling sweetness of him. With all her being, she sang. She sang the homage song, and the healing songs, and at first her voice was as lost as a whisper, but it changed as her determination grew. Her voice swelled bigger than this

valley, spilling into the next valley and beyond. Once she thought she heard Dria answer her, and Elan sang even sweeter for it, singing again until she thought she would disappear inside the sound.

The dragon looked happy. He opened one dying eye and thanked her in cross-speak for making him less lonely. But he could do no more than that. He had no strength to leave this place of dying, and nothing Elan could do would change it. Her fierce need to care for him was too late. She swam up to the ancient creature's heart. She laid her face against his scaled side, longing to hear any song from within, any calling that might echo there from a past time, when the sea was magnificent with his power. But there was nothing.

Elan let herself drift down onto the dragon's back and let go all her torment. She cried and felt part of her passing with the dragon. All of her grief, and the sorrow in the Balance, pressed down on her. In the inner wailing that filled her, Elan thought she heard the dragon try to still her tears. It had been a comforting voice, in cross-speak, and it seemed to come from so very far away. Not like the dragon's, rumbling with nearness, but faint, as if an ocean passed through it. This voice sounded more like the Squid's. But her Squid was gone, and Nemu, too. It was over. She had failed.

Elan knew the grief would take her mind. She had known the risks of opening to the Seadragon again. It didn't matter. Not now. They would both die here, at the end of earth and sea, far from everyone who loved them. She raised her head as she heard the comforting voice again, so faint it was hardly different from her own breathing. She felt a flutter of recognition and listened for it again, fearing to hope what she heard had been real. She waited, but there was nothing. Had it been a cruel echo in this valley?

<Elan,> said the distant voice. It came again, familiar. <Elan?> It was real!

<Squid?> Elan felt disbelief, but called out in her clearest, most far-reaching cross-speak. She swam as high as she could and cross-spoke in every direction. His voice came to her again, seemingly from the east. It was distant and scattered, but without question, the Squid.

<Your Squid is . . . mother,> he said, his words getting lost on the current. Elan waited, still not understanding,

and hearing a long rumble of unintelligible words. < . . . shedragon.>

<What did you say, Squid? I cannot understand what you say.> Elan trembled with excitement.

<. . .whole . . . egg beneath the broken one—not destroyed.>

<There is an egg!?!> Elan screamed.

<I took it—still alive—hot sands and sat it like a mother,> he went on. Elan could hear the pride in his voice. <Because—Kagor, feared to call before now—he is dead, Between—we feel it here.>

<We? You said we, Squid? The egg has hatched?> Elan was afraid this was all dream.

<Between like to hear her?> the Squid asked, and before Elan could understand his question or ask him about it, she heard something unbelievable. An even fainter cry than the Squid's call, but it grew louder, as if finding its distant voice for the first time. Elan felt light with happiness as the small dragon's calling entered this morbid valley, dispelling with its life the oppressive pall. Elan's skin tingled as the dying dragon threw up his head, trying to hear this dream more clearly. The tiny shedragon called again, a sweet high trilling of magic and promise. This time the Seadragon heard it. His great sorrowful eye sought out Elan as if to ask, "What was that?"—and Elan swam down to him.

She hovered directly in front of his eye. The crescent pupil within the dark green orb grew larger as the darkness spread. This spark, this question was the final thread that held him to this world.

<That was a shedragon—a shedragon calls you.> Elan cross-spoke through the dense cloud of his sinking. <Another lives, and you are not alone.> She looked into the giant confused eye.

<We heard it before—we thought it was the voices lying,> the Seadragon said. His voice, even this near, was breaking, and almost lost on the current.

<She is real.> Elan would not lie to him, and he knew it. She waited. Finally she asked, <May we leave this place of dying?> The Merra saw him look inward at all the many centuries he had lived, measuring his part in the Balance and what strength he had left to keep it. He slowly closed his eyes; even if he wanted to, he had no strength to leave this place. The dragon shifted again and

laid his head across the back of the killing ship. Once more the high trilling came, as if she knew the danger that threatened on the other side of the ocean. The trilling came without stop, and Elan, with a thrill, saw the dragon lift his head again. She spoke clearly to him, that the Squid had saved an egg and had brought it to the hot sands to sit it, and now there was another dragon, and the end could be held off, if only the Seadragon could rise and be away from this place.

<It's a shedragon—> Elan repeated, swaying in front of the clouded eye to keep him awake. <A shedragon, and she needs you. If you die, she will be alone for all the centuries.> Elan saw the dragon thinking, could feel the slow meandering of his mind. Something inside the woe-ful creature sparked. He had measured his own loneliness and would not leave that pain as his only legacy to the last of the Seadragons. His head dipped and came up again as if to shake the darkness from it. In his eye, a new light flickered, some haunting remnant of the radiance that once had shone from him.

<I will help you,> Elan said, and a song of light and living things came to her. She sang it first softly, then with more determination.

The Seadragon tried to pull his legs beneath him, but they would not come. The dragon's head fell down again, as if he were trying to will his legs to move, and slowly they came. When they were at last beneath him, Elan stopped her singing to coax him up, to fill him with all the strength she had in her. She felt the great creature straining. He rocked forward and backward and Elan saw the waves of blue pain that rippled over his skin, but still he could not rise. The trilling came again as if to beckon him, and torment filled the dragon that he was not able to answer her. The valley around them filled with the despair; Elan felt the grief of her powerlessness.

The Seadragon slumped down. It had all been for nothing, because she had come too late, and now the dragon could not leave this place. He had found purpose, but his strength was gone. Elan pressed herself against his neck and felt his pulse straining. She clutched at him and felt the wrench of her loneliness.

Something sharp pressed into her skin. She didn't care what it was, until it continued, and in the faint prick of pain, came memory. It was the luti. Her luti shell from

the Nemu. But the Nemu were gone. They flew in the warm and turquoise seas of some distant place. How could they hear her from this bleak valley?

Before she would not call them, because she would have brought them to their deaths, as she had Nemu—but Kagor was dead. Was there some chance they would come? That they might hear her from the end of the earth and sea?

Elan tore the chain from her neck and pulled away Tia's silver webbing. They had to hear her. She would hold them to their vow even if it meant calling them to this valley of dying. Elan had to believe the calling would find them. She held the luti to her lips. She blew timidly at first, then felt the urgency rise. As fiercely and as rapidly as she could, Elan filled her lungs and blew.

She blew and blew through the silent signal, and the Seadragon, fading below her, harkened to it too. Elan rose high above the valley, blowing in each direction, she didn't know how long, and sank down again, exhausted. She closed her eyes a moment against the breathless dizziness that swept over her. They had to come. She opened her eyes to see if there had been some miracle, but saw nothing but the wide expanse of sea above them and the towering walls of onyx. Elan grasped the shell again and started to blow frantically. She blew to keep the shadow at bay, to keep it away from her and the Seadragon. She began to feel dizzy again and thought, Now I am dying. We go now. When she saw the first specks of silver light come down over the ridge above them, she thought night had come, and she was seeing the stars fall into the sea around her.

Elan stared up for a long time before she realized it was not stars. It was the Nemu. It seemed more like a dream, as little by little the sea above her filled with glistening gray bodies. They had come as fast as the legend promised. Elan could hear their excited and curious squeaking as they saw the Seadragon beneath them and wondered why the Merra had called. Elan had never seen so many in her life, had never believed so many would answer. More kept arriving, packing in closely until they became a solid roof of living bodies. All of them studied her with loving and curious eyes. Even the Seadragon felt their presence, the murmur of their laughter, alive in this morbid place.

They waited for Elan to speak, to tell them why she had called on them to keep their vow. All of them fell silent at once, and the gentle flicking of their tails stirred the water with fresher scents. Elan looked up at them filling the sea-sky, and was overcome with a grateful reverence.

<The Seadragon is dying,> Elan said, seeing that more of them arrived with every passing moment. <It is this place that kills him and keeps him here. We must get him away, and I need the Nemus' help to do it.> She waited to be certain that all had heard her cross-speak voice. They all bobbed their heads and flippers. <When the split tails fall in the sea? When you find them alive and push them to the surface,> Elan explained, <so you must move the Seadragon.> She knew that was like asking them to move an island. Two of the dolphins were swimming down to her, and as they drew near, Elan recognized the scarred one and the young male she had ridden so long ago. She greeted them both with the sign of respect.

<You came.> Elan felt herself crying.

<And you, Between are,> said the elder. <The same calling your searching Merra heard, we heard. Not far away, we were.>

<Your Seadragon move we will,> the younger one said. They sensed her urgency and grew more purposeful.

<Between here, stay,> the dolphins requested, then they sped toward the others with powerful thrusts of their tails. They must begin before it was too late.

Elan moved away from the Seadragon. She knew he understood enough to fight the abyss, even as the Nemu fought to pull him from it. Elan sang the homage song and watched the light in his eye linger, burning and ebbing. His pupils had grown huge; he was only vaguely aware of the dolphins around him.

At once, the thousands of Nemu swam down, and as they did, the light from the sky above came streaming where it had been blocked by the mass of them. They worked together as one, and fanning out evenly, they swam in a ring around the massive Seadragon. Nearly touching the sand, in the same instant, they turned their noses toward his scaly flanks. There was no space between, dolphin next to dolphin. Elan saw the line of gray backs, tense with readiness.

The scarred Nemu swam around them, and Elan could hear the shrill whistle of his commands. In the same

instant, she heard a chorus, thousands strong, of whistling. They pushed their heads against his sides. Suddenly there was an explosion of motion as all of them began pumping their tails furiously, straining against the colossal weight. Millions of iridescent bubbles frothed in the green-gray sea. The dolphins pushed with all their might, pumping powerful muscles to their limits and churning up the entire valley. Elan was buffeted by the whoosh of sound, and by a dolphin-made tempest.

Elan didn't realize it at first, it had happened so gradually, but she saw the scarred one circling and heard him give another whistle command, and suddenly many of the Nemu who had been near the front of the Seadragon darted away to swim beneath him. The ancient creature was rising. Slowly, unbelievably the water opened up beneath him, almost as if he were floating on the millions of bubbles, shimmering toward the surface. The Seadragon seemed to know he should remain motionless, though his eyes grew more luminous in his rigid head. Elan's breast filled with an uncontrollable joy. Higher and higher he rose; the waves of blue-black colors that had been rippling across his skin were now changing. The palest green iridescence began as the dragon felt himself surrounded by so many pure hearts and being taken from the mouth of the abyss.

Elan followed them up as they slowly neared the ridge. Now that the massive weight was moving, the dolphins struggled less. Hundreds of them changed sides hurriedly to push the Seadragon ever higher. The water warmed as they neared the surface. As they passed over the ridge, Elan became suddenly afraid again. This next valley echoed the voices calling down. Would they increase their enticements as they felt the Seadragon slipping away? He was still so vulnerable, and he passed too near.

The dolphins sensed the increased threat, and they continued their frenzy of pushing. Slowly and constantly the massive Seadragon drifted over the rust-red wasteland. It was a bizarre and wondrous sight, one they would someday make songs about. His bones would not rest in this place. Not yet. Some of the tired dolphins fell away, and others took their places.

Finally, the entrance of the valley approached, where Dehtu had fought Kagor. The Nemu went on pushing the Seadragon, their task not yet completed until the black

mountain walls were behind them and the last whispers of sinister currents drifted off.

The Seadragon trembled with the need to move his massive limbs. She saw the scarred Nemu look at her to be certain it was all right, then she heard his whistled command. All at once, the thousands of dolphins shot away from the giant creature and hovered about him, encouraging him with their squeaks, watching to see that he would not sink to the bottom but could swim on his own. Slowly, the Seadragon threw back his head and, with a low rumble of determination, willed his legs to move. They pulled against the water beneath him. The wound from the sharks was painful, but it did not keep him from using the leg. Now that they were away from this valley of dying, Elan could heal him. The Seadragon looked at her, and she saw the will to go on in his eyes, weary and with no joy, but he would go on.

<She's waiting for us,> Elan reminded him. He closed his eyes, and she knew he understood. She looked at the Nemu, who were swimming about the Seadragon. The water upon her tongue tasted clean, and on it was the sweetness of promises kept.

Elan found the old scarred one among them, and the young male as well. There were no words to thank them, so together they watched the dragon and swam with him. Elan was euphoric. The young dolphin studied her carefully, and with sudden laughter, he shot around her again, leaving her in a waterspout, and dizzy with her quiet joy. She could hear the many dolphins laugh and felt in them their need to be gone, now that their task was complete. She spread her arms to wave and gave them the sign of respect. They paid homage to her, the Between they knew would come, and whistled their farewells.

In a flash of silver, as bright as the dazzling moon, all the dolphins turned at once and were away, back to the place from where they had come. She watched until they became small specks in the green sea.

Elan turned her eyes lovingly to the Seadragon. In the distance, Dria, Dehtu, and the others approached. She would find someplace far from this terrible valley to take them all and to make them well. She would kiss Nemu before she said farewell to him, and she would call the other Merrra. Together they would listen for the sound of the shedragon, somewhere out in the endless sea, and

they would find her and sing to her. Elan swam closer to the Seadragon to lay a hand upon him as he labored. She sang a song of courage for him, for his heart knew no joy, only duty. But Elan knew she would lift this burden from him. She felt an odd serenity in the face of the journey still ahead of them. It came from knowing she had done what she must. She had her Seadragon, and she was Between. She knew that when their voices drifted out upon the current, all would know by the light that fell around them that the Balance had been kept.

Epilogue

The grotto was lush with swaying sea fans and emerald-green mosses. The starter fruit trees brought from the garden were half a tail high and full of new growth. The walls of the grotto made a nest in the shallow section of the sea. Woven sacks of healing plants hung from the rounded stones for use in tending the Seadragon.

Elan could hear the dull rumble of his slumber. It was a constant, comforting hum upon the current. He lay at the far end of the grotto, tail curled beneath him, and his massive head atop talons, eyes closed. He liked nestling in the warm white sand, snuggled against the thick mosses on the walls around him. The water was no more than thirty tails deep, and his back reached nearly to the surface. Elan often felt the sun's warmth radiating from him as she swam close to rub the salve from healing plants into his skin. The Seadragon was healing well, his scales falling away and growing back a deeper, more lustrous green. Patches of raw flesh remained, but they grew smaller and less frightening.

Issa had stayed for nearly a full moon, planting starters, teaching Elan which plant cured what ill. She had left Tia behind in the garden, and Reena who was well enough to take over many of the duties of replanting.

The wound that Kagor's sharks had left in the Seadragon's flank was the only one that had become infected. Minnow, Issa, and Elan paid special attention to it, and Elan learned much about the art of healing. She and Minnow hovered over every inch of the dragon, and his offspring, the shedragon.

Dria was with them, as was Dhetu, who was head of the guard that protected the dragon. They stayed in a

camp not far from the Seadragon, and many of the guards came often to work in the nearby gardens or to listen to Elan's singing.

There were many songs in the grotto. Often Minnow and Dria sang with Elan, and recently the dragon had felt well enough to hum with them. It was a deep, melodious thunder that emanated from the depths of him, and Elan noticed that it enchanted even the great whales. She would see them stop and draw nearer from their migrating path. Their intelligent eyes looked inward to old memories, and they harkened to the songs that enveloped them. Often the shedragon, caught up in the joyous noise, would add her raucous squeaks and trillings, never in time with the rhythms but perfect in their wild abandon.

Elan smiled and nestled closer to Menol's chest. That she thought she would never feel it again made the sweetness of his arms around her even more a gift. The life that grew inside her seemed only right in the fruitfulness of the grotto.

They heard the laughter of Minnow and the squeaking of the shedragon. Elan and Menol turned to see the Squid, his patient eyes following the scramble of motion around him as Minnow and the shedragon played a game with him. The shedragon was growing quickly and was nearly Minnow's size. The deep green orbs of her eyes sparkled, and the smallest protrusions on her head promised to become horns. Her scales were small, and fine, and of ever-changing colors, green to lavender to coral pink. Her underbelly was pale and still soft as skin. Her tail was a constant wonder to her, and she chased it often. She was a delicate miniature of the Seadragon, and it seemed a miracle that she was a living being. Vibrant with life, she was either in constant motion or sound asleep next to Elan, or Menol, or the Seadragon.

Elan smiled at the Squid. Always dignified, he lavished attention on the shedragon that was protective and mothering. His patience was as deep as his life had been long, and Elan marveled at his imperturbable calm.

Minnow and the shedragon darted about the Squid, each of them holding the tip of one of his long arms, racing around each other and around him. The shedragon held the soft tip of arm in her still-toothless gums, paddling at the water around her, her tiny taloned fingers fanning out the translucent webbing between them. She

swam through the legs that were knotted and around those that still drifted free, chasing Minnow.

The Squid became completely tangled. He could free himself at any time—the slickness of his arms and tentacles made the task easy—but for the shedragon's benefit and amusement, he let himself drift and pretended to be helpless. This delighted the shedragon to no end as she swam around him, fanning her tail next to Minnow, admiring their work. In an expression of pride and her own boundless enthusiasm, the small seadragon threw back her head and trumpeted her joy for all to hear. It was a sound she had not made before, and it surprised her, as it did everyone around her. Even the dragon opened one sleepy eye. The shedragon was pleased with the sound of it, so she trumpeted again, and once more, even louder. Echoes of it spread out upon the current and filled all who heard it with new dreams.

Elan dreamed. She dreamed of her beloved Nemu and of his flying over the tops of frothy waves. She dreamed of the faces of the young guards who had given their lives for the Between and for the future of them all. She dreamed of the old shedragon and knew that a part of her had finally found peace, free of her burdens. And another part of her lived in the ebullient spirit of the new shedragon.

Elan looked at the sparkling blue of the sea around her. She looked at Menol, and the dragon, at Minnow and Dria and the tiny shedragon. The Squid, untangling himself, emanated the profound tranquillity she was feeling. The shedragon trumpeted again and ended with a trilling note, high and triumphant. Elan laid her hand upon the luti and thanked the Balance for this perfect moment.

About the Author

Alida Van Gores grew up in southern California in a family of tall blonds. She received her B.A. in art from Occidental College, and an M.F.A. from USC in writing. A fondness for adventure has taken her to six continents, including rafting on the Uru Bamba River in Peru, hiking to the Annapurna base camp in Nepal, and gazing upon the aurora borealis in Norway. She loves gardening, the blues, and baseball. She is primarily a screen-writer, and MERMAID'S SONG is her first book. Alida lives in L.A. with a rotund bull terrier named Jeep.

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